

## **The Import of the Media in an Emerging Democracy: An Evaluation of the Nigerian Situation**

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**ABSTRACT** The media are an indispensable agent of development in any nation given their invaluable contribution to governance as a watchdog and partner in progress with other arms of government. In a developing country like Nigeria, the mass media have been instrumental to the delivery and consolidation of the current democratic experience. Within this context, this paper examines the role the media have played and continue to play in the socio-political and socio-economic reengineering of structures in a country faced with enormous problems which militate against its optimal performance as an emergent democracy. The paper employs the historical and analytical approaches as its methodology of illuminating on the issues set out. In the end, it suggests that the Nigerian government revoke all laws that have served as clogs on the wheels of the Nigerian media; hence, it canvasses for the urgent passage of the freedom of information bill (FOIB) into law.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In modern day government arrangement especially in democratic polities such as India, the United States of America, South Africa, Nigeria, Australia, among others, there exist three arms of government namely the executive, the legislature and the judiciary with the media being the fourth as it is an institution that checkmates the excesses of the other three arms. Perhaps, this why Anegbode and Azelama (2003), with particular reference to Nigeria, contend that:

The press remains the fourth estate of the realm, the watchdog and the conscience of the nation. It is the organ that informs the public about the activities of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.

The canine metaphor of the media as a watchdog is an indication of its watchful role in any government. Interestingly, the media do not only serve as a watchdog but guides the government towards change. Information is the basis of effecting change as well as tackling the consequence of change. The information needed to run an open and successful government is, to a large extent, provided by the media. The information disseminating role of this "estate" is a veritable tool for change. Adeyemi (2006) says that "throughout the history of mankind, the press has always occupied the fore-front of socio-political and economic changes". From the foregoing, we can safely say that the media's role

in the running of the affairs of a government is that which cannot be relegated. Thomas Jefferson, a former United States of America (USA) president once said in one of his many speeches on the importance of the media that if he were made to choose between a government without a press or a press without government, he would not hesitate to choose the latter (quoted in *Tell Magazine* Editorial July 15, 2005).

Within this context, this paper examines the role the media have played and continue to play in the socio-political and socio-economic reengineering of structures in a country faced with enormous problems which militate against its optimal performance as an emergent democracy.

### **DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

In Nigeria, the framers of the Constitution of the Federal Republic in recognition of the sacred role of the media enshrined in it (Section 22, 1999 Constitution) that: The press, radio, television and other agencies of the media shall at all times be free to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people. Regrettably, the Nigeria state, like many African countries, right from independence has been confronted with the problems of economic development and that of nation building. Reflecting on the problems plaguing the continent, Omoera (2006) notes that:

*Contemporary Africa is beset by a myriad of*

*problems. From north to south, east to west, pervasive corruption, hunger, political, religious and ethnic crisis, unemployment, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS pandemic, internal and external brain drain, and so on, are plaguing the continent. The leadership is almost overwhelmed by these developmental needs and ever-multiplying challenges.*

The above position aptly captures the sorry state of affairs that the rabid political leadership in Africa may have foisted on the people. Some scholars have argued that the incursion of the military into mainstream politics in most Africa states, particularly in Nigeria have made matters worse. However, the exit of the politicians in uniform from Nigeria's political space served as a fillip to the aspirations of the Nigerian populace for true political leadership, which derives from a democratic process. The desirability of democracy over the sham of the militarized politics was succinctly noted by Igili (2005). She asserts that:

*Virtually all Nigerians believed that the exit which resulted to the return of democratic government will finally put paid to the leadership problems, which characterized the military regime. This explains the ardour with which the Nigerian populace embraced the return of civil rule in 1999.*

Democracy was reintroduced in Nigeria some nine years ago after a chequered political history dominated by military juntas. This indicates that Nigeria is relatively a young, emergent democracy. Izibili and Eribo (2008) observe that, whereas an almost inexhaustible literature exists on the concept (democracy), there is a glaring absence of consensus by scholars on the appropriate definition of the nature and contours of the term such that it is rather difficult to argue for a specific conceptualization of the term as the proper meaning since democracy is now generally seen as a term with many meanings.

Owolabi (1999) reacts to the above by contending that, if we define democracy as the "rule of the people" or "sovereignty of the people", without defining it on the features prevalent among democratic regimes in the contemporary world, then the concept will not be shrouded in mystery. It is probably because of this Izibili and Eribo (2008) argue that the ideal definition of democracy is that which gives recognition to the essence of the concept as "rule of the people". By this, they meant that, democracy implies a

system of government which every individual participates in the process of governance. This presupposes that the principle of participation is an essential component of democracy, which must be reflected in every genuine definition of the concept. Any democratic form of arrangement ought to have certain basic ideals that are important for it to be called a democratic state. Lively (1975); Izibili and Eribo (2008) assert that these ideals are freedom or liberty, accountability to the people, right to vote and be voted for, among others.

To achieve the above a number of institutional structures which are functionally alive to their responsibilities need to be in place. One of such is the media, and this discourse proceeds to examine how much the media have done in delivering and consolidating democracy in Nigeria.

### **THE IMPORT OF THE MEDIA IN THE DELIVERY AND CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

#### **Information Role**

Whenever the term media is mentioned, what readily comes to mind is information dissemination. This is so because, one of the most important functions of the media is its information carrying functions. As noted elsewhere, the whole business of the press in Nigeria and West Africa at large was borne out of the need to arouse consciousness in the mind of the people during the colonial period. Nnamdi Azikiwe as reported by Anebode and Azelama (2003) affirms that there is no better means to arouse the African people than that of the power of the pen and tongue.

The Nigerian press has lived up to expectation in spreading useful and developmental information to society. This accounts for the tons of news stories, editorials, commentaries, interviews and other information giving activities of the media in both the print and electronic media. The media have helped the Nigeria people to keep abreast of the developments in the political space of the country. The "Nigeria Decides" programme on NTA during the 2007 elections graphically illustrates a contemporaneous information giving role played by the media to make the electorate know the profiles of their potential leaders from the interviews and fact files about aspiring

politicians. Stressing on the importance of the information role of the media, Opubor (2002) asserts that:

*Many people in our urban areas will find it difficult to imagine life without the media. Just think how it would feel to wake up one morning, turn on your radio set and receive nothing but static noises. Many of us would not want to experience such a deprivation more than once in a lifetime.*

The scenario painted by Opubor imagines the deprivation we could suffer without the media in society.

### Leadership Role

The Nigerian press has always been useful as a medium for structuring the political landscape of the country, an avenue for agitation and proper political leadership. One of the tenets of the social responsibility theory is enlightening the public and making them capable of self-governance. This tenet therefore puts on the shoulders of the media, the responsibility to ensure good leadership in the society in which it operates. Anegbode and Azelama (2003) adumbrated on the leadership role of the media in ensuring independence for Nigeria when they affirm that:

*One of the instruments of African (Nigerian) Nationalism therefore, was frequency or longevity; each Nationalist newspaper was a vehicle for the formation of public opinion. The press was a medium for agitation and political leadership.*

The press referred to here, were the newspapers like *Iwe Irohin*, *The Comet*, *Lagos Times*, *West African Pilot*, to mention a few, which were instruments for fighting colonialism or bad policies at different levels and stages of Nigeria's struggle for self rule (Ufuophu-Biri 2006; Haruna 2004). The aim was to arouse empathy and political awareness in the demand for independence. The media do not only agitate or draw attention to the bad policies of government but also drum support for the positive initiatives of government. Okenwa (2001) said that the press had ceased to be an opposition press and has assumed a contributory responsibility in the awesome task of transformation which was ushered in at independence.

The efforts of the press in leading to credible government policy is seen in the instances of organizing press conferences and interviews,

undertaking public campaigns on important national issues like the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution, Road Safety Campaign, MAMSER, Census and a host of other government programmes. Olanipekun (2003) buttresses the role of the media in political governance when he said that the press should take the lead in preaching and advocating sustenance of the rule of law which is a sine qua non to a successful democratic dispensation. The media's support for the fight against corruption by exposing the highly placed politicians and government officials in today's government are an indication of its leadership role.

### Watchdog Role

The media being described as a watchdog is in recognition of its watchful and critical role against the bad practices of the government and private individuals. Ralph Akinfeleye (2000) describes journalists (media professionals) as corps of intrepid reporters who are always caught in the web several steps ahead of the goons. The political leaders and their cronies at one time or the other try to find ways to tailor the constitution to suit their selfish needs and aspirations. Ugulah and Erebi (2008) agree with Akinfeleye's position on the power of the media to avert such activities when they maintain that: Obasanjo's third term agenda would have succeeded but for the vibrant media and a coalition that ensured that Nigerians were properly informed to resist unconstitutionality.

Olusegun Obasanjo in pursuit of third term in office, an attempt to remain in power for long motivated the law making organ of the government to circumvent the constitution. But the media in performing their watchdog role drummed publicity to this ignoble act and his ambition to perpetuate himself in office longer than necessary was truncated. Another example bordering on Obasanjo that the media called attention to and criticized was the donation of a huge sum in millions of naira to his party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) during the 1998 local government elections. The Tribune Editorial (24 Nov. 1998) called on Obasanjo to supply the public a full disclosure of the identities of those involved (in aiding him). Olutokun and Seteolu (2001) after criticizing this huge sum of ₦130 million given by Obasanjo made a notion that "the authorities must seriously consider setting a ceiling on the amount indi-

vidual aspirants could spend in the course of seeking public office". Various newspapers and broadcast houses played watchdog roles in monitoring the 1999 elections. For example, *Newswatch* in its January 25, 1999 reported irregularities in the run-up to the state Assembly/Governorship elections. These include under age voters in Katsina, multiple voting in Abia State as well as bribery stories in Edo, Delta and Ekiti States. The public was apprised of these irregularities when the media helped in trumpeting the issues with the aim of effecting a change.

### **Electioneering Role**

The mass media are very useful in the electoral process in any nation. The media in their agenda setting role helped the Nigerian electorate to have an insight into the personalities of the political office seekers and their manifestoes or their plans. McCombs and Donald as reported by Ugulah and Erebi (2008) observe that in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. They maintain that "the mass media may as well determine the most important issue that is, the media may set the 'agenda of the campaigns'". It is true that the press set the issues, agenda for the campaign and that agenda dictates the issues on which many people ultimately base their voting decisions (Ugulah and Erebi 2008).

During the transition from military rule to democratic rule from 1998-1999, the media lived up to its expectation of keeping the public abreast of happenings in the political space of Nigeria. This explains why *Tell Magazine* did a weekly countdown to the handover in every single issue of its publication between July 1998 and May 1999 to reflect on the transition programme (Olutokun and Seteolu 2003). Besides, the "Nigeria Decides" political debate programme on the 2007 general elections produced by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), "Focus Nigeria", "Political Platform" produced by the African Independent Television (AIT) are some other programmes through which the media helped in influencing voting in the last general elections.

### **Accountability/Whistle Blowing Role**

The Media have been irrepressible in holding the citizenry, particularly the political leaders

accountable in Nigeria. The media have unearthed high profile cases in an effort to expose brazen corruption which many public/political office holders have been enmeshed in. Some of these are:

### **The Buhari-Gate Scandal**

A former speaker of the House of Representative, Alhaji Salisu Buhari was the first to occupy the office after the 1999 election. He stayed in office despite news of irregularities that trailed his election and biographical records. Backed by his mega political party, PDP he continued official duties. Sani Kabir, a Nigerian journalist and his counterparts in the United States of America (USA) were not comfortable with the state of affairs, and in the manner of the Watergate scandal dug out facts to support the claims that Buhari's age declaration and educational qualifications declared in his pre-election data form were wide off the mark. *The News*, a newspaper in Nigeria published the news in its July 12, 1999 edition. The story entitled "The Crook" alleged that Buhari amplified his actual age and never attended the famous Toronto University in Canada. The embattled speaker reacted by slamming a suit against the paper but the media did not back down in their fight against this "falsehood". In the end, he was disgraced out of office.

Olutokun and Seteolu (2001) quote the *Comet*, another newspaper calling for the resignation of the speaker as: "...we reaffirm our position in an earlier comment. The Honourable speaker should climb down from his high office until investigations are concluded". The media's role in ensuring accountability of government to its citizens was also displayed by the *Guardian Newspaper* when in its Editorial of July 20, 1999 entitled "Buhari: The Path of Honour" argued that:

*The House of Representative has a constitutional responsibility in the matter. The members should now rise up to the challenge by conducting a thorough investigation to ascertain the veracity of the allegations...He should vacate his office until the matter is over. This is the honourable thing to do.*

Though the former speaker and his cronies fought tenaciously to stay off the impending political doom, justice prevailed and he was shoved out of office. Olutokun and Seteolu (2001) conclude that: As a result of the media's watchdog role, Buhari on July 22, 1999 dropped his bravado,

pleaded guilty to the allegations and resigned his office, thus paving the way for his prosecution.

Although Nigerians may not have been satisfied with the punishment meted out to the former speaker for his sharp corrupt practices, the truth remains that the media lived up to their responsibility of ensuring that the government is accountable to the people. This event, like many others, attaches credence to the fact that journalists in Nigeria go the whole hog to fight political corruption even at the risk of their lives. In fact, it was a defining moment in the political evolution of democratic experiments in Nigeria.

### **Dr. Okadigbo's Scandal**

A former Senate President, now late Dr. Chuba Okadigbo was impeached from office after a vote of 81 to 11 against him on August 8, 2000 (Olutokun and Seteolu 2003). The impeachment was on the grounds of corruption in the management of public funds and abuse in contract awards. The embezzled fund totalling ₦67 million was for the purchase of cars and office furniture among other misdeeds. The indictment came when Alhaji Ibrahim Salim, clerk of the house made the stunning revelations at the July 24, 2000 Kuta Panel, a panel set up to look at impropriety in the activities of the members of the house. The media which had been monitoring the panel started the publicity of misconducts. Many screaming headlines and stories circulated. Examples are: "PDP Abandons Okadigbo" (*Tribune* August 7, 2000), "Pressure Mounts on Okadigbo to Quit" (*Comet* August 1, 2000). *This Day*, August 3, 2000 back page reports Segun Adeniji, the editor as saying:

Okadigbo allowed himself the indulgence of situating his power and responsibility within the number of contracts he could award to himself and his cronies – it was even more tragic that the man would lie so blatantly to the probe panel.... He should be told to clear his office that the matter is over.

Indeed, the Media Rights Agenda (2003) affirms the accountability role of the media in relation to the above case by noting that "the media remain a cardinal institution for consolidating and extending Nigeria's young democracy". In this regard, cases of mismanagement and corruption such as the Evan(s) Enwerem (a former Senate President in Nigeria), Patricia Etteh (a

former speaker, House of Representatives), Prof Adenike Grange (a former Minister of Health) Iyabo Obasanjo (a senator caught up in shady deals in the health and power sectors), House of Representatives ₦2.3 million Car Scandal, the Halliburton corruption scandal, the Vaswani brothers' scandal and many other improprieties in government circles at different times have been blown open by the media. Apart from drawing attention to wrongdoings in and outside government, the whistle blowing stance of the Nigerian media has to some extent brought some level of sanity into public office. At least every public office holder in Nigeria knows that the media are capable of opening any can of worms whenever or wherever they lay their hands on them.

### **Agitational Role in Electoral Reforms**

Although elections are over and elected officers serving in different appointive capacities the credibility of the elections are still being questioned as evidenced in the ongoing election tribunals and appeal court cases in many parts of the country. The most recent of these being the appeal court's upholding of an earlier tribunal's judgement to the effect that Adams Oshiomole won the 2007 governorship election in Edo State as against the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC's) declaration of Prof Osarhiemen Osunbor as governor. A similar scenario played out in Ondo State where the court declared that Olusegun Mimiko is the duly elected governor, not Olusegun Agagu as declared by the INEC. Journalists kept and are still keeping tabs on these and many other electoral cases in the local, state and federal tiers of government, to ensure that justice is done. Besides, the media are at the forefront of the agitation for electoral reforms by reporting the irregularities and malpractice that characterize the 2003 and 2007 elections and calling for immediate action after the elections. For example, President Umaru Yaradua in his inaugural speech (Voice of America, VOA, News, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2007) accepted that the 2007 general elections were fraught with irregularities and so promised to make reforms. With the persistence and insistence of the Nigerian media, the government instituted the electoral reforms committee (ERC) to examine the entire electoral process with a view to effecting reforms to raise the standard of elections. Ultimately, this will give credibility to election



activities in Nigeria and command national and international acceptance. In this connection, Reuben Akpati as reported by the *Sun* of March 18, 2008, affirmed that “the media have played a role in Nigeria’s electoral reforms by carrying out civil campaigns against the problems of the electoral reforms and are doing a good job of it”

In furtherance of the electoral reform process, some Nigerian media professionals have attended a training programme organized by the International Republican Institute, an international body that ensures the growth of democracy in countries of the world to train journalists to effectively report the major issues at stake during electoral reforms process. This training is expected to enable journalists to educate the citizenry on the process and improve the technical competence of participants in various aspects of the democratic experiment.

### CONCLUSION

Arguably, from the above discussion, the media have done much in consolidating the Nigeria’s nascent democracy, though the use of freebies, “co-opting”, death threats, assaults, insufferable legislations, intimidations and even assassinations of media professionals have greatly weakened their ranks. Moreover, most Nigerians hold the view that Nigeria is not a democracy yet. They believe that Nigeria as a nation, at best, only has traces of the elements that are inherent in the process of democratization. In this connection, Tony Momoh, a former minister of information (in Nigeria) explains that there is no democracy without the press. He hinges the success of a democracy on the measure of freedom of the press in the country (*Tell Magazine* September 23, 2004). This position emphasizes once more, the function of the media in a political setting and the need for it to be free. Nevertheless, the Nigeria government has from time past viewed the press as a “dangerous neighbour” (Momoh 2002) that should not only be kept at arms length but fettered. It is in the realization of this somewhat warped view and the urgent need to revitalize all organs that could help Nigeria to become truly democratic in the eyes of Nigerians and non Nigerians; we call for the revoke of all obnoxious laws which hamstringing the media and the immediate passage of the freedom of information bill (FOIB), which has been in the

limbo for too long, into law. The expectation being that the media would be more active in deepening democratic ethos in Nigeria if they are free from any encumbrance being it real or imagined.

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