The Media and Democratic Rule in Nigeria

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Introduction

This paper analyses the watchdog role played by the media in Nigeria’s current democratic dispensation. It discusses the role of the media in the transition period between 1988 and 1999, as well as their championing of a cleaner and healthier polity in exposing highly placed state officials who got into office through fake credentials or by making bogus claims.

Case studies of the media’s role in this respect include the disgrace from office of Alhaji Salisu Buhari, former Speaker of the House of Representatives; as well as the fall of Senator Chuba Okadigbo former Senate President, who was impeached in the wake of allegations of corruption and misappropriation of funds.

To get to grips with the role of the media in these national controversies, the editorial content of the publications, which championed these struggles, were identified and collated. These were complimented where possible, by interviews with some of the editorial personnel involved in these episodes.

The Media: An Overview

Nigeria has the biggest and most virile press community in Africa followed by South Africa and Kenya (Park, 1993:1). Ogbodu (1996:1) conservatively puts the number of publications (Weeklies, dailies and magazines) at 116, although a number of these are fickle and are at the margins of survival. The period since 1999, have witnessed a mushrooming of sorts in the newspaper industry with new titles like The Anchor; and National Interest springing up as well as the re-launch of moribund or prostrate titles such as The Concord. As political competition heats up more new titles are expected to be born, most of them with a predictably short life span. One consequence of the economic downturn of the 1980's and 1990's and specifically a result of hostile authoritarian economic policies towards the media is that as at 1999, the combined circulation of all newspapers barely reach half a million, in a country of close to 120 million people. If we add the circulation figures of magazines and other publications, to those of newspapers, they barely hit the 1 million mark.

The Punch, a privately owned newspaper is perhaps the most widely read newspaper and its print run is between 60,000 and 80,000 copies per day. The Guardian, a favourite of the intellectuals and respected for its independent, sober views, had a print run in 1999 of between 50 and 70,000 copies per day.
Other newspapers such as the privately owned National Concord, This Day, Post Express, The Vanguard, as well as the state-owned Daily Times, and the New Nigerian do legs well in circulation terms than The Punch and The Guardian. The magazine market is dominated by three giants namely, Tell Magazine, The News and Newswatch, and have circulation figures of about 100,000, 80,000 and 50,000 respectively.

One underreported, but increasingly assertive newspaper genre are the vernacular newspapers, which in the Yoruba speaking region made a rebound in the closing years of military rule. A rash of vernacular newspapers have sprung up in recent years, trying to build on the success of Alaroye whose circulation competes favourably with the most successful national dailies (See Dare 2000). In broadcasting, there are close to 45 television stations, with about 10 of these in private bands, while of the 44 or so radio stations, a handful are privately owned following the deregulation of broadcasting by the state in 1994 (Bankole 1995; Olukotun 1996). The most successful private electronic media are AIT and Minaj televisions as well as RayPower Radio, all of which offer refreshing contrasts to the heavily state-controlled contents of state electronic media.

As in Kenya, publications rise, fall and are sometimes reborn with dizzying regularity.

**Media and Accountability: Case Studies**

In this section, we consider in some depth media coverage of:

a. The transition to democracy 1998-1999;

b. The documentation controversy which led to the fall of Alhaji Salisu Buhari, former Speaker of the House of Representatives;

c. Media’s role in the controversy which led to the impeachment of former Senate President, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo.

It should be borne in mind that the watchdog role of the media in this period went beyond these cases to include for instance, exposure of the irregularities in and falsification of the biodata of Chief Evans Enwerem, former Senate President, which led to his forced resignation, as well as the furore over the biodata of Lagos State Governor, Chief Bola Tinubu, which triggered a political crisis. The latter, however, narrowly survived impeachment, largely because the Alliance for Democracy – dominated Lagos State House of Assembly ruled that the inconsistencies in his Curriculum Vitae, arose from genuine mistakes. We only focus on three of these cases, however as mentioned earlier.

**A. The Transition**

The media, in the New World order, have emerged as a crucial part of the apparatus for vetting and legitimising elections. Conceived here broadly as the print and electronic organs of mass communication, they provide information to the voters
about the candidates, the electoral process, actual voting dates and the rules of the game.

All aspects of the transition to democracy (1998-1999) were extensively covered and intensely reported by the media. Following the de-freezing of the political space by General Abdusalam Abubakar on 20 July 1998 and the release of a transition timetable, a senior journalist, Mr. Tunji Oserri organised an agenda-setting seminar for journalists in August 1998. Entitled “The Media and the Transition”. It had the declared aim of getting journalists to reflect on the transition programme. Oseni set the hall rolling by listing the responsibilities of the media in a transition period. These include, keeping the administration to its ward or promise on the hand over of Power to civilians; being strong in the face of danger; offering where necessary, alternatives to the transition agenda; serving as a feedback on government policies as well as expanding the score of the transition to are as such as morality, accountability, management of the national economy and the amelioration of poverty (Oseni, 1999:16). There is reason to believe that the media, by and large, and in spite of a few excesses took its outlined responsibilities seriously.

To keep the transition on track, for instance Tell magazine did, week after week a countdown to the hand over in every single issue it published between July 1998 and May 1999. It read in its November 7 edition (P7) 24 more weeks for Abubakar to handover to an elected civilian president- in bold letters and boxed.

This was a kind of advocacy advertising for the transition programme. Indeed, Onome Osifo-Whiskey, managing editor off Tell said that had General Abubakar reneged on the handover date, "we would have gone back to the trenches to pick up guerilla journalism. We left our underground paraphernalia intact for most of 1999" (Interview, 2000).

To underline their watchdog role, the media criticized General Obasanjo's donation of N130 Million to the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in the run-up to the December 5, 1998, local government elections.

For instance, the Tribune Editorial (24 Nov. 1998: 8) called on Obasanjo to supply to the public "a full disclosure of the identities of those involved (in aiding him) - to help members of the public in establishing the real character and motives of the contributors - in the final analysis, however, the authorities most seriously consider setting a ceiling on, the amount individual aspirants could spend in the course of seeking public office".

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was put on its toes by the media in the interest of fair elections. The Guardian Editorial comment of August 19, 1999 (P.16) suggested that INEC should put in place measures to avert rigging of elections, it also counseled that INEC should distance itself from manipulation by security agencies, state administrators and bureaucrats.

In terms of balanced coverage, the 3 competing parties got fair coverage, although the effect of bigger advertising spending by the PD P was felt in enhanced coverage (See Olukotun, 2000b). However, the regulatory guidelines of the Press Council and the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission prevented any serious excesses.
Abuses and irregularities were fully documented and monitored by the media. In its report of January 25, 1999 (P.27) Newswatch reported irregularities in the run-up to the state Assembly/Governorship elections. These include underage voters in Katsina, multiple voting in Abia State as well as bribery stories in Delta and Ekiti States. Most print and electronic media did the same.

The Presidential elections of February 1999 were intensely covered by both national and international media. Confronted with a choice, between accepting a flawed election and its cancellation, the media mostly advised a grudging acceptance of the results - without glossing over the hitches and the flaws.

Doubtless, the watchdog role of the media was at work throughout the transition and beyond.

**B. Alhaji Salisu Buhari vs the Media**

Alhaji Salisu Buhari, a business tycoon dealing in computers typifies the prosperity of a military-assisted “contractocracy” under Nigeria’s rentier political economy. Taking advantage of a flawed transition; especially the horse trading and politics of zoning that went on in the PDP in the months immediately before and after the Presidential elections of 1999, Buhari defeated Alhaji Sadiq Yar’adua, a journalist to emerge as the nominee of the North-West zone for the office of the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Given that the office, had been ‘zoned’ by the party to the North-West, complaints about irregularity in his bio-data were brushed aside at this stage.

However, the young politicians luck ran out, when Sani Kabir a founding member of The News Journal got wind of the allegations leveled against Buhari.

The News, one of the publications that survived underground under General Abacha’s despotic regime at first treated the issue with relative levity, when it was first brought up by Kabir at its Sunday afternoon editorial meeting. Two weeks later, however, and partly due to a dry spell in the flow of stories, the editors revisited Kabir’s juicy scoop, and found it a most shocking revelation.

In the best tradition of investigative Journalism, The News thoroughly researched Buhari’s claims about his age, which was lower than what the constitution stipulated for the office he now held; as well as debunked his claims to have attended the University of Toronto. The American angle of the research was conducted by Dapo Olonmyomi who had lived in the U.S on exile, since 1996 as well as Kunle Ajibade, who was also in the U.S to recuperate, after his release from a 3 year detention (Interview Kabir, Ajibade ). Entitled "The Crook in the House ", the story was on the cover edition of 12 July 1999. The nation was aghast. Other newspapers and magazines as well as human rights groups across the country enlisted in the moral crusade to get justice.

Buhari, on his part denied the allegations, slammed a hefty multi-million naira libel suit on The News, employing the services of Mr. Rotimi Williams, a well heeled legal luminary, and played the ethnic card by insinuating that a Southern (Yoruba)
newspaper was out to get him, a Hausa-Fulani politician. Neither The News or the other sections of the media relented nor were deterred by the threats.

In its second editorial on the issue within a week, The Comet (July 16, 1999: 14) advocated that:

"Meanwhile we reaffirm our position in an earlier comment. The Honourable Speaker should climb down from his high office until investigations are concluded."

The more influential The Guardian newspaper in a similar vein argued in its editorial comment of July 20, 1999 entitled "Buhari: The Path of Honour" that:

"The House of Representatives 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. It would be awkward for the embattled speaker to preside over the affairs of the House during the course of the investigation. He should vacate his office until the matter is over. This is the honourable thing to do."

The News followed up its scoop by another cover story on 26 July, entitled "Buhari Gate - An Inside Story". Neither was it deterred by the purchase by Buhari or his supporters, of virtually all the copies of The News which originally came out with the story, in Abuja, the Federal Capital. It was a gimmick, too late, for the issue had been put on the national agenda. As a result of the media's watchdog role, Buhari on 22nd July dropped his bravado, pleaded guilty to the allegations and resigned his office; thus paving the way for his prosecution.

C. Dr. Okadigbo vs the Media

The impeachment by 81, to 11 votes on August 8, 2000 of Dr. Chuba Okadigbo as Senate President, over allegations of corruption and misappropriation of funds, had a lot to do with media advocacy of a sanitized National Assembly. Okadigbo, it should be recalled assumed office as Senate President on November 18, 1999, following the resignation of his predecessor, Chief Evans Enwerem, in circumstances similar to that of Alhaji Salisu Buhari.

Although the media had generally put a spotlight on the National Assembly, which it fingered for truancy, and for approving extravagant allowances for itself, no serious allegation was levelled against Dr. Okadigbo until Senate itself in July 2000, partly as a result of its own internal politics set up the Idris Kuta panel to take a closer look at the award of contracts in the Senate between 4th June 1999 and 17th July 2000. The other terms of reference of the panel include, (a) Identify the officers of the Senate and other Senators that participated in the exercise of contract awards, (b) Identify those to whom the contracts were awarded, the amounts involved and the purposes, (c) Determine the extent to which laid clown procedures were observed in the award of the contracts (CDRR Annual Report, 2000: 131).

The media's watchdog role of intently monitoring the proceedings and giving prominence to the allegations of irregularities, corruption and perfidy should be
noted. Beginning from the stunning revelations of Alhaji Ibrahim Salim, clerk of the Rouse at the Kuta Panel on July 24, the media consciously mainstreamed the issue. Interestingly, even after Dr. Okadigbo was indicted for spending an unauthorised N30M to purchase cars and another N37.5M to furnish his official cars among other misdeeds, he continued to maintain his innocence and threatening not to resign.

At this point, especially following the release of the Kuta Panel report, the media piled pressure on Okadigbo to vacate his office. They did this by giving front-page coverage to the issues involved and the resulting controversy.

This apart, columnists and opinion writers condemned Okadigbo in strong terms, calling on him to quit office. One of them, Segun Adeniyi, editor of This Day on Saturday wrote in a representative article entitled "Just Go!" (This Day, 3 August 2000, back page) that:

"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-If by now somebody has not surrendered his medal' (I did not say mace) then he should be told in clear terms that the market is over”.

In spite of waving the ethnic card by rallying many Igbos behind him and making threatening calls to editors, Okadigbo had to vacate his office, principally as a result of media advocacy. Although in Nigeria’s fractious polity, Okadigbo’s fall may have been partly engineered by his political opponents, who made the most of his debacle, the media insisted on a minimum standard of decency for high state officials. In the next concluding section, we tie the issues together and look forward.

**Conclusion**

As a recent study eloquently puts it:

"Without information, there is no accountability. Information is power and the more people who posses it; the more power is distributed. The degree to which a media is independent is the degree to which it can perform an effective public watchdog function over the conduct of " Public Affairs" (Pope, 2000 : 119-120).

As we have seen, the Nigerian media with a lively tradition of independence and outspokenness take their watchdog role seriously, and have insisted on it under both military and civilian governments. In the three cases examined, the transition; the Buhari and Okadigbo affairs; we see the media providing information of a critical nature, and shaping the discourse agenda in ways that deepen the quality and content of Nigeria’s burgeoning democracy. In the three cases highlighted the media were crucial to opinion formation and to the eventual outcome of the events reported and highlighted. There is every reason to believe, given Nigeria’s plural and robust media, that this will continue to be the case in the foreseeable future.

The media is not immune to corruption, ethnicity or factionalism, all of which afflict the Nigerian socio-polity. And this has necessarily detracted from their moral profile and
consequently weakened their watchdog role. Self-cleansing, internal regulatory mechanisms such as The Press Council as well as keen commercial competition, help to restrain, in a measure some of these abuses. In any case, the committed segment of the press, is still by and large free from the rot while the possibility of disrepute or business failure serve as a check against grossness.

Our case studies show that the media remains a cardinal institution for consolidating and extending Nigeria’s young democracy, in view of their oversight functions with respect to the three arms of government as well as their own ranks.

References


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