

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION ON JOURNALISTIC ETHICS AND AUDIENCE TRUST

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ABSTRACT: The media plays a crucial role in disseminating information and shaping public opinion. The rise of news commercialization, however, has had a significant impact on journalistic integrity, news content, and audiences. This paper aims to explore the *impact of news commercialization on journalistic ethics and audience trust*. Through an analysis of various scholarly sources, this paper examines the influence of commercialization on journalistic integrity, news content, and audience trust. The paper is based on the press's social responsibility theory, which motivates media organisations to make positive contributions to their society. The study concludes that the commercialization of news can lead to conflicts between profit-driven journalism and ethical practices, and news organisations may prioritise sensationalism, clickbait, and attention-grabbing headlines over balanced, fact-based reporting, resulting in a decline in news coverage and a loss of public trust. The paper recommends that the promotion of ethical rules should be a top priority for news organisations, ensuring the adoption and strict adherence to these guidelines in order to protect the integrity of journalism.

Keywords: Influence, News Commercialization, Media, Practice

INTRODUCTION

The mass media are instruments of mass communication tasked with enlightening, instructing, and entertaining the public. The mass media provides society with information about events both domestically and internationally, enabling people to respond appropriately. One approach to fulfil these obligations is to use broadcast news on radio and television to provide information to a wide range of audiences.

The commercialization of news in Nigerian media houses commenced due to the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986 and the subsequent removal of subsidies from government-owned media houses (Ekwo 1996, Ogbuoshi 2005, as quoted in Omenugha and Oji, 2012). Due to the escalating production costs and declining circulation, media organizations have employed various strategies, such as the commercialization of news, in order to generate revenue (Oso, 2000). The scenario has resulted in significant compromise, with the sensationalization of news items and the dissemination of half-truths reaching a concerning level.

Prior to 1986, the concept of news commercialization was unfamiliar in the field of journalism in Nigeria. Although the word may have existed, it was not relevant to Nigerian journalism practices. News commercialization entered the business under General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida's (rtd) military regime. This is accurate in that Ekwo states in Nwosu and Ekwo

(1996) that the economy saw significant deregulation beginning in 1986 when Babangida's military dictatorship implemented a structural adjustment program.

According to Ugande (2011), the mass media, in particular public service radio and television, which had previously only received government subsidies, was the first to witness the startling consequences of S.A.P., and the government's immediate withdrawal of its subsidy caused them a great deal of trouble. Those included not being able to pay staff, not being able to buy equipment, and not being able to maintain their equipment.

According to Ugande (2011), NTA and FRCN were forced to come up with a number of alternate revenue-generating strategies in order to meet the government's strict fiscal regulations. The commercialization of news in broadcast media was one such tactic. Currently, this is being done all around the nation. According to Udomisor and Kenneth (2013), this circumstance has resulted in a great deal of compromise, with news stories becoming increasingly sensationalized and half-truths reaching concerning heights. However, the broadcasting organization of Nigeria (BON), which serves as an umbrella organization for state-owned stations, asserts that it needs the money in order to continue operating. Nwokoh (1996) asserts, acknowledging the aforementioned claim made by Udomisor and Akutus (2013, quoting), that the claim that selling news at auction will increase their revenue stream is unfounded. He said they ought to consider alternative products to market. Selling politics to the highest bidder is a delicate matter. Individual journalists struggle to stay afloat in the same way as the organization does due to financial strain.

The broadcast media organizations should exist to serve the public interest, as stated by Kenneth Odorume (2015). Nonetheless, news commercialization appears to be a scourge of contemporary Nigerian media practice. This suggests that the public will only hear the thoughts of the wealthy, pushing everyone else to the background. Unquestionably, media companies are required to safeguard the public interest of their viewers.

Therefore, the news articles are compared to consumer-paid commercial goods that are supposed to the needs of the consumer and work in their best interests. According to Asogwa & Asemah (2012), there are a variety of reasons why media organizations are founded. While some aim for the media to serve societal purposes such as reflecting society and establishing agendas for national discourse, others are more concerned with making money, which means the media are profit-oriented. Given that media material is regarded as a commodity for sale in Nigeria, much like other commodities in a capitalist setting, the latter may play a significant role.

This suggests that a reporter who sells his conscience for money under the pretext of "news commercialization" will ultimately censor his reporting to appease the buyer of his conscience. Here, the adage "He who pays the piper dictates the tune" is applicable. So, if news commercialization is like a wheel, brown envelope journalism is the grease that makes the wheel better so it can spin.

When it comes to spreading knowledge and influencing public opinion, the media is extremely important. Nonetheless, the increasing commercialization of news has had a significant impact on media practices and behaviour. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of news commercialization on journalistic ethics and audience trust. This article will investigate

how commercialization affects journalistic ethics, news content, and audience confidence by analysing a number of academic sources.

Overview of News Commercialization

News is commonly regarded as a report of a recent and extraordinary occurrence in society; news is sent promptly. It is timely, current, uncommon, and noteworthy. The primary purpose of news is to promptly report current events and provide information and education to the members of society. The journalist is burdened with the task of actively collecting news items, which will then be processed and distributed to the public (Asemah, 2011). The process of news commercialization entails the transformation of news into a marketable product, which can be acquired by individuals with financial resources in order to amplify their perspectives. The commodification of news has resulted in the neglect of significant advancements. In the realm of mass media, those who desire to have their voices heard must bear the financial burden of paying for news coverage. News has evolved into a pre-packaged broadcast or report that is financially supported or funded by the parties involved. Through this approach, individuals who face financial constraints encounter challenges in accessing the media. Therefore, only organizations and individuals with financial resources are able to obtain media coverage during news broadcasts by paying a predetermined charge (Asemah, 2011). News commercialization refers to the practice of electronic and print media outlets publishing paid news without disclosing the sponsor's identity, thereby creating the impression that the news is unbiased, impartial, and socially responsible.

According to Udomisor and Akutus (2013) as well as Nnorom (1994) cited in Ekwo (1996), news commercialization refers to the practice in which the broadcast media present news or news analysis as a commercial message without disclosing the identity of the sponsor. This creates the perception among the audience that the news is unbiased, impartial, and socially responsible. Therefore, only organizations and individuals with financial resources can obtain media coverage during news time by paying a predetermined charge.

In his perspective, Ugande (2011) defines news commercialization as the practice of granting individuals, communities, private and public enterprises, non-profit organizations, local governments, state governments, and ministries the opportunity to access mass media platforms during news broadcasts in exchange for a predetermined fee. He states that the intended message is presented in a news format and included in the news bulletin. Prospective consumers who choose to remain unnamed have the ability to purchase news analysis and news commentary.

Tsebee and Odorume argue that the notion of news has become obsolete, as news is now determined by financial resources. According to Asogwas and Asemah (2012) and Una, Frank Uzochukwu (2014), it is necessary for those who wish to be heard in the mainstream media to pay for their news.

The dual academician further elucidates that this approach poses challenges for individuals who are financially disadvantaged in terms of accessing the media. Therefore, only organizations and individuals with financial resources can obtain media coverage during news time by paying a specified charge (Asemah, 2011).

This also contradicts one of the main principles and Constitutional duties of the media, as stated in chapter 2 of the 1999 constitution. According to this chapter, the media is expected to be

accountable to the public by providing accurate information and educating the members of society. Furthermore, this action violates the specific regulations outlined in section 5.1.3 of the Nigerian Broadcasting code. According to this section, news in any form is universally regarded as sacred. Therefore, sponsoring news broadcasts, commentaries, analysis, current affairs programs, and editorials undermines their integrity and introduces a bias in favor of the sponsors. As a result, it is prohibited to have any form of sponsorship for news programs, including the use of commercial backdrops.

Furthermore, according to section 5.1.18 of the code, any commercials featured in news and current affairs programs must be clearly recognized and presented in a manner that ensures they are easily discernible.

Although the National Broadcasting Commission has taken a firm stance on this matter, Nigerian Broadcast Stations are encountering significant difficulties in adhering to this mandate due to the immense hurdles they face in maintaining the operation of their stations. As stated by Tsebee and Odurume, an important problem arises from marketers who demand that their sponsorship be integrated into the news segment.

Adaba (2001), a former Director General of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), differentiates between the lawful sale of airtime for paid advertisements that are placed next to or within breaks in the news, and the practice of charging news sources for the opportunity to have their pre-paid opinions or messages covered and relayed as news.

Ismaila et al. (2021) explained that news commercialisation has implications for national development and the journalistic profession. This is because it suppresses the voice of the have-nots in society including their development needs. This perpetuates class interest and class dominance. By extension, it contributes to the domination of the owners of the means of production over the working class, which has been a Marxist concern. Nwanne (2018) posits that news commercialisation is unacceptable because it interferes with professional news judgment. According to the Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists (1998) which was endorsed by the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), and Nigeria Press Council (NPC), the decision concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of professional journalists. But when the financial benefit is the consideration for news, the interest of those who have the financial resources have the advantage, rather than the elements of newsworthiness that guide the profession. This is detrimental to national development.

Kenneth and Odurume (2015) in Ibrahim (2018) state that journalism practice in Nigeria seems to be plagued with the malady of news commercialisation. This is a pointer to the fact that only the haves will get their views disseminated to the public thereby neglecting the have not. Ideally the press must be seen to be of public interest.

Influence of News Commercialization on Journalistic Integrity

The process of commercializing news frequently results in conflicts of interest and undermines the integrity of journalism. Advertisers and corporate interests exert a growing influence on journalists and news organizations, leading to skewed reporting and a preference for profit over truthful and ethical journalism (McManus 2019). The imperative to allure advertisers and sustain profitability can result in sensationalism, the use of clickbait titles, and the disregard of

significant news stories (Benson 2012). This undermines the function of journalists as watchdogs and diminishes their capacity to deliver impartial and dependable information.

The commercialization of news, motivated by the desire for financial gain and public involvement, significantly influences the integrity of journalism, frequently posing challenges to the conventional principles of the field. The monetization of news can greatly influence the credibility of journalism. As the news industry increasingly prioritizes producing cash, it might give rise to several issues that weaken the fundamental ideals of journalism (Ronald, 2021).

An important consequence of the commercialization of news is the possibility of ethical transgressions. Journalists may be inclined to accept bribes for publishing or suppressing news, resulting in biased and skewed reporting. This can undermine the legitimacy and professionalism of media institutions, as well as erode the trust of the public (Rodrigo, 2024).

Another problem is the impact of interest organizations. The commercialization of news can render it vulnerable to manipulation by groups that have the means to purchase media coverage in order to advance their own agendas, so jeopardizing the impartiality and integrity of the news.

It is important to acknowledge that the broadcast media's role as a watchdog is gradually being diminished as they prioritise news stories that will generate financial benefits for both the broadcast organisation and the journalists. According to McManus (2009), the economic rationalisation of news suggests that journalism's costly yet crucial watchdog role would experience a transitory reduction. News consumers have a strong interest in news since it serves as a means of staying updated about significant events, government acts and policies, societal issues, and more.

In Uganda, Lwanga (2002) conducted a study to examine the impact of liberalisation and commercialization of media services on the programming of Radio Uganda. The researcher utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The findings indicate that while Radio Uganda still adheres to some concepts and values of public service, its programming policy has progressively shifted towards commercial reasons. This is clearly demonstrated by the current increase in commercialised activities and a decrease in educational and developmental programmes. The study identified financial constraints and limited resources as factors that have compromised the roles and nature of public service radio programming. Additional research has uncovered that radios in Uganda are mostly founded with the intention of generating profit, rather than serving the public interest. In conclusion, the monetization of news can significantly influence the integrity of journalism. Journalists and media institutions must prioritize addressing these difficulties and strive to uphold the fundamental ideals of journalism, including objectivity, independence, and integrity

Influence of News Commercialization on News Content

Commercialization also affects the content of news stories. With the need to capture viewers' attention and generate revenue news organizations often prioritize entertainment value over informative reporting. This tendency is evident in the increasing emphasis on celebrity gossip sensational crime stories and infotainment (Franklin 2011). As a result, important news topics such as political and social issues may receive less coverage leading to a lack of public awareness and a shallow understanding of complex matters (Curran & Seaton 2017).

Due to the decline in print operations sales and their overall incapacity to develop a viable online business model, news organisations have struggled over the past few decades to stem the severe financial bleeding they are going through (Holcomb 2011; Siles and Boczkowski 2012; Hunter 2015). Several newspapers were compelled to cease operations or enact financial reductions, leading to a diminished workforce of journalists operating with limited resources (Ekdale et al. 2015; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Gómez, 2018). The decline of traditional advertising, coupled with the inability of internet marketplaces to make up for the losses, has resulted in intense economic competition and a growing commercialization of news (Campos-Freire, 2010).

Nevertheless, certain crucial variables can supersede many normative issues, such as robust advertising revenue and rivalry among audiences. This compels the media to contemplate the specific kind of advertising and news pieces that captivate the viewers. Hamilton (2014) argues that the commercial media prioritises the audience's interest in a particular piece of information over the traditional journalistic elements of who, where, what, when, and how. From this standpoint, the significance of the news is of lesser importance compared to its profitability. Additionally, research indicates that news coverage tends to prioritise topics related to influential individuals, prominent institutions, and popular figures (Bennett, 2010). Their motivations, which typically possess the power to influence news content, are the reason for this phenomenon (Gans, 2011). They may also have an influence that goes beyond their typical level of importance in the news. Ishengoma (2007) noted that advertisers, businesses, politicians, and influential allies of media owners exert influence and undermine editorial independence. This occurs when corporate organisations compel owners to pressure their editors into refraining from publishing unfavourable content in order to safeguard advertising revenues. Editors are required to be fair, unbiased, resolute, upright, and just in fulfilling their commitments and responsibilities. However, this is often not the case owing to external influence driven by financial interests.

According to (Ogongo-Ogong'a & White 2008), certain editors are compelled to engage in self-censorship due to the significant influence of commercial interests. This is done in order to appease advertisers, even if it comes at the detriment of the public interest. The expert elucidates that disputes frequently arise between the editorial team and the advertising department when it comes to making crucial judgements about significant advertisers.

Influence of News Commercialization on Audience Trust

The increase in news commercialization has had a detrimental impact on audience trust. As news organizations prioritize profit and sensationalism the public's confidence in the media's objectivity and credibility diminishes (McQuail, 2010). The erosion of trust is further exacerbated by the blurring of lines between news and advertising as sponsored content and native advertising become more prevalent (Newman et al., 2019). The audience may become sceptical of the information presented leading to a decline in media consumption and reliance on alternative sources.

The major backlash of commercialization of the media, according to Oso (2006), is that the role of the media as custodian of public interest is greatly impaired. This is because media content, especially broadcast programmes, are overridden by the commercial logic of the advertising industry with its utmost dependence on entertainment as a ploy to capture the unwary audience. This, Oso contends, is usually done at the expense of other programme

genres, especially those with deep current affairs and high intellectual discourse content. Democracy, Oso laments, “suffers in this regard” as “consumerism and political apathy become the order of the day as radio and television purvey fun and laughter in place of knowledge and enlightenment”

Equally, worrisome in the commercialization phenomenon is the growing exclusion of the populace from participation in media discourses, news and programme sources. As access to the media increasingly gets tied to the ability to pay either as programme sponsors, newsmakers, advertisers or producers, the poor, and the socially marginalized groups in the society become in Gaye Tuchman’s words, symbolically annihilated (Gaye, 1981 cited in Oso, 2006). This reductionist attribute has turned the citizens to mere consumers in what a media scholar describes as part of the process of the disempowerment of the poor and the socially deprived.

Idowu (2001 p.4), cited in Oberiri (2016) say that: for news to be useful it has to be credible, for it to be trusted it must measure up to some exacting standard of assessment such as: accuracy (when in doubt leave out), balance (reflect all sides of the story), fairness (impartiality to all parties involved), human angle (people minded), depth (well researched/investigated), presentation (telling the story rightly), and reward (be of social relevance to audience).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Ezeah, and Jonah (2017) on “Appraising Audience Views of the Influence of News Commercialization on Credibility of Broadcast News Content”. The study looks into how the people who watch news broadcasts in the metropolis of Minna perceive the impact of news commercialization on the reliability of the content. The study aimed to investigate the impact of news commercialization on the credibility of television news. There was usage of the quantitative survey design. Results showed that 39.9% of respondents strongly agreed that news commercialization erodes news credibility since it only presents the opinions of the wealthy and powerful. This demonstrates the audience's strong concurrence that the news exclusively represents the perspectives of the affluent and influential. The study suggests, among other things, that the broadcast media convey news to the street level of the average person in order to restore their trust. This can be done through news bulletins, commentary, current affairs, etc.

Aseamh and Omula (2013) in the study titled "Understanding the Influence of News Commercialisation on Objective Journalism Practice in Nigeria" explore significant aspects of news commercialisation. The survey research methodology was employed, with a questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection. The findings indicate that the commercialization of news hinders the practice of objective journalism in Nigeria. Additional research indicates that the process of news monetization can diminish the authority and control that journalists have over editing and gatekeeping. The paper's findings indicate that news commercialisation has a detrimental effect on journalism practice in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper recommends, among other things, that the government should provide financial support to both private and public media organisations. This would help reduce their reliance on profits generated from commercialised news.

Oberiri (2016) on Journalists’ Perception of News Commercialization and its implication on Media Credibility in Nigeria. The study examines the attitude of journalists in Nigeria

regarding the commercialization of news and the trustworthiness of the media, specifically focusing on journalists in the Jalingo Metropolis. A quantitative survey design was employed. The population of journalists in Jalingo Metropolis is approximately 293. The findings indicate that the commercialization of news has a negative impact on the objectivity and balance of reporting. The study also found that inadequate compensation, individual avarice, and corruption contribute to the persistence of news commercialization. Several recommendations have been proposed to counteract this trend. It is suggested that media professional organisations should enforce ethical standards in the industry by penalising journalists who violate established codes of conduct. Additionally, it is important to provide comprehensive education and professional training for journalists, as this will effectively address the issue of news commercialization

Social Responsibility Theory

The theory suitable for this study is the social responsibility theory. The theory came into the limelight because the press misused the freedom given to them, which they enjoyed as a result of the free press. Under every free press, it is expected that citizens be given opportunity to express themselves freely to enhance the free flow of information. Therefore, the press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible.

The theory urges media practitioners to ensure the representation of all facts not siding or becoming sensational in reportage but being balanced and unbiased.

The significance of the social responsibility theory in this study lies in its focus on the responsibility of the media to fulfil the public interest and maintain ethical principles. The theory postulates that the media should function as a watchdog, providing accurate and impartial information to the public while advocating for democratic principles and the overall welfare of society.

The social responsibility theory offers a theoretical framework for comprehending the ethical obligations of journalists and media organisations while examining the effects of news commercialization on journalistic ethics and audience trust. This explains the significance of upholding journalistic integrity, autonomy, and responsibility despite the influence of financial pressures. This idea emphasises the possible conflict between the need to make as much profit as possible and attract audiences, and the moral need to prioritise the public's access to trustworthy and impartial information.

By investigating the implications of news commercialization on journalistic ethics and audience trust through the lens of the social responsibility theory, media professionals can explore the complex interplay between media commercialization, ethical decision-making, and the media's societal responsibilities. This method can offer useful insights into the difficulties and possibilities linked to upholding journalistic ethics in a progressively commercialised media environment.

DISCUSSION

The news industry has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, with the increasing commercialization of news content. This shift has had a profound impact on the

behaviour and practices of media professionals, as they navigate the delicate balance between journalistic integrity and the demands of the market.

An important consequence of the commercialization of news is the demand to prioritise ratings and cash above journalistic standards. In their pursuit of a larger audience and increased advertising revenue, media organisations may be inclined to sensationalise news, prioritise entertainment value over substance, or even compromise their ethical standards (Picard, 2004). This phenomenon can result in a deterioration in the standard of news reporting, characterised by a stronger focus on sensational headlines and eye-catching pictures rather than thorough, well researched journalism.

Furthermore, the monetization of news can also impact the choice and presentation of content. Media outlets may prioritise covering stories that have a higher likelihood of attracting a large audience or generating engagement, rather than focusing on issues that are genuinely vital for the public interest (McManus, 1994). This can lead to a reduction in the range of news topics covered, as there is a preference for subjects that are seen to be more financially profitable, such as celebrity news, sports, or stories that appeal to human emotions.

News commercialization leads to the merging of editorial content and advertising, resulting in a blurred distinction between the two. Media organisations may employ strategies such as sponsored content, product placement, or native advertising to increase their revenue. These techniques blur the line between journalism and advertising, making it less evident (Carlson, 2015). This phenomenon has the potential to diminish the confidence that the public has in the media and give rise to apprehensions regarding the autonomy and impartiality of news coverage.

Moreover, the monetization of news can also influence the working circumstances and employment stability of media practitioners. Due to escalating financial difficulties, media organisations may be more motivated to reduce expenses by downsizing their workforce, outsourcing tasks, or establishing stricter performance measures (Deuze, 2005). These factors can result in higher workloads, employment instability, and a stronger focus on production at the expense of quality, eventually hindering journalists' capacity to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Conclusion

The news industry has experienced significant changes due to the rise of digital media and the commercialization of news content. This shift raises concerns about the impact on journalistic ethics and audience trust. The commercialization of news can lead to conflicts between profit-driven journalism and ethical practices. News organizations may prioritize sensationalism, clickbait, and attention-grabbing headlines over balanced, fact-based reporting, resulting in a decline in news coverage and loss of public trust. The commercialization can also influence the selection and framing of stories, leading to biased and skewed representations of current events. Journalistic independence and objectivity may be compromised when news organizations are beholden to advertisers or corporate interests, leading to self-censorship and a failure to hold powerful institutions accountable. The erosion of audience trust is another consequence, as the public may question the credibility and reliability of the information they receive, leading to a growing distrust in the media and a decline in engagement with news sources. In conclusion,

the pursuit of profits must be balanced with ethical and responsible journalism principles to maintain audience trust and fulfil their role as a vital source of information and watchdog.

Recommendations

Based to the study's conclusion, the following recommendations were proposed:

1. The promotion of ethical rules should be a top priority for news organisations, ensuring the adoption and strict adherence to these guidelines in order to protect the integrity of journalism. This encompasses explicit guidelines about evidence-based journalism, impartial representation, and the prevention of sensationalism and clickbait strategies.
2. Enhance journalistic training and education by providing continuous learning opportunities for journalists and media professionals to strengthen their understanding of ethical journalism, autonomy, and impartiality. This can aid in reducing the possible influence of commercial demands on journalistic practices.
3. Promote endeavours to augment media literacy and cultivate critical thinking skills among the audience to encourage engagement and education. Disseminating knowledge to the public regarding how to distinguish trustworthy news sources and recognise any biases might aid in the restoration of confidence in the media.
4. Regulatory Oversight: Promote regulatory measures that specifically target the ethical ramifications of commercialising news. This may require working together with regulatory authorities to set and enforce rules that protect journalistic ethics and ensure audience confidence.

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