Journal of
Mass Communication & Journalism

Ali, J Mass Communicat Journalism 2015, 5:1
DOI: 10.4172/2165-7912.1000239

Review Article Open Access

Media Ownership and Control Versus Press Freedom in a Democratic Africa

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Abstract

The deregulation of the broadcast industry in Africa has helped politicians to advance their ambitions at the expense of the ethics of the profession of journalism. In Nigeria, there are prevalent cases of the state media being used by government to run political campaigns of only the political parties of the ruling class. This is the same story where private media organizations are owned by chieftains of some political parties in the country. Such media (both print and electronic) are used as propaganda machineries by these party chieftains and also used as media for carrying out negative reports about the party in power. Many African countries have similar situations. This paper looks at how the ownership of media organizations across the continent has interfered with the standards of professionalism in journalism. The paper will use the social responsibility theory and the libertarian theory to serve as theoretical framework. The paper will dwell more on the role of ownership in the media coverage of some African countries from 2011 to 2012 and try to make comparison with what is obtainable in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Keywords: Media ownership; Press freedom; Mass media

Introduction

The development in media technology around the world has made it a necessity for governments around the world to rely on the mass media as a strong medium of passing information across to the people. Africa is not left behind in this approach. As the world focuses on the broadcast media, countries have been trying to catch up with this pace. Different countries have set up their own radio and television stations to promote their image both locally and internationally. Cammaerts and Carpentier said "the importance of media in terms of democratic practices and fostering a democratic or civic culture can hardly be denied. However, the way in which these democratic roles are articulated varies from necessarily ideologically laden, as it is embedded in distinct theoretical traditions, on at least two levels."

The relevance of the mass media in stamping control on the corridors of power cannot be over emphasised. During the days of tension in Cote d'ivoire 2011 that led to the ouster and incarceration of the former Ivorien president, Laurent Gbagbo, the national media were constantly used to disseminate information to the country. It was the same story during the coup detail in Mali. The junta had to rely on state media to tell the public that they are in full control of happenings around the country. Mtimbe and Bonin [1] said, "communication is central to the success of development and democracy."

Media ownership: A global perspective

"He who pays the piper calls the tune" is a common statement in the media. Ownership has continued to play an influential role in the editorial policies of media organisations. It is so bad in some media organisations that the ethics of journalism are exchanged with the opinions and decisions of the proprietors of the organisation. McQuail [2] while writing on the influence of ownership on mass media content said, " there is no doubt that owners in market based media have ultimate power over content and can ask for what they want to be included or left." This is against the ethics of journalism. The influence of media ownership is felt more by government owned media organisations especially in Africa. In countries like the United States of America and Britain, there are laws meant to check the excesses of owners. In Britain, there is limited (if any) influence on the content produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation by government. According to McQuail [2], Meyer's survey evidence confirmed that US journalistic ethics frowned on owner intervention, although editors reported a fair autonomy in practice." Contrary to this survey, Schultz's study of Australian journalists showed strong support for the fourth estate role but also a recognition that it was often compromised by commercial consideration and owner pressure. According to a report compiled by Media Development and Diversity Agency in South Africa, control of any media company can be divided into three: Shareholdings and equity, general management and editorial control. According this report, "There are codes of good practise that govern how media controllers (editor and station managers) interact as laid out by regulatory bodies." But how many media owners stick to these codes? In Africa, government has continuously used the state owned media to crush the voice of the opposition. Many governments have used these media to their advantage during presidential elections campaigns across the continent, especially if the government in power is contesting. In such cases, the opposition would have to turn to God for a miracle. Melody in Meier, stated that "in addition to ownership concentration of the mass media industry, content provision, packaging and distribution have also become a standardised production and marketing process in which the messages communicated are contained and directed in both quantity and quality to meet the economic imperatives of media owners." Giddens in Meier said, "The media have a double relation to democracy. On the one hand the emergence of a global information society is a powerful democratising force. Yet, television, and the

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Received December 09, 2014; **Accepted** January 20, 2015; **Published** January 27, 2015

Citation: Ali A (2015) Media Ownership and Control Versus Press Freedom in a Democratic Africa. J Mass Communicat Journalism 5: 239. doi:10.4172/2165-7912.1000239

other media, tend to destroy the very public." Within the context of supporting democratic transitions, the goal of media development generally should be to move the media from one that is directed or even overtly controlled by government or private interests to one that is more open and has a degree of editorial independence that serves the public interest.

Media and democracy

McQuail [2] stated that "the earlier mass media of press and broadcasting were widely seen as beneficial (even necessary) from the conduct of democratic politics." Considering the fact that those who have the resources to own media organisations will always have the upper hand in terms of prominence in the news, McQuail [2] said "the typical organisation and forms of mass communication limit access and discourage active participation and dialogue." Government control of print and broadcast media in many African countries leave little scope for discussing opinions and therefore, public debate. According to a document produced by the Office of Democracy and governance in the United States of America in 1999, access to information is essential to the health of democracy for at least two reasons: First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Second, information serves a 'checking function' by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carried out the wishes of those who elected them. In Africa, the perceived significance of the mass media in strengthening democracy on the continent led to the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation, which was developed in Arusha, Tanzania in 1990. According to Mtimbe and Bonin [1], "The Charter called for : the emergence of a new era in Africa - an Africa in which democracy, accountability, economic justice and development for transformation become internalised and the empowerment of the people, initiative and enterprise and the democratisation of the development process are the order of the day." While in some countries, the antagonistic relationship between government and the media helps in shaping the democracies of these countries, it is not so in most African countries, where most governments see criticisms from the media, no matter how constructive they may sound as a direct attack on their administration. As a result of this perception, most of these administrations have devised means to curtail the excesses of the media which in most cases are against the fundamental human rights on freedom of expression. Journalists within these countries have been sent to jail, or detained without trial or even beaten up or humiliated by wives and families (direct and indirect) of these leaders. In fact, some media houses have even been forced to close down because of remarks made that sound unpalatable to the administration in power. Ocitti [3] said, "to African leaders, however, the freedom the media was demanding was to be placed within their own power positions and a wider context of national unity." Hence, governments in power spend money on state media and those who do not have any invest heavily to have one on ground so that they would use such media as tools of propaganda and image making to cover for poor performance in office. According to Ocitti [3], "The Benin National Conference, the interim parliament that drew up a new democratic constitution, certainly thought the media had done a commendable job educating the public on their democratic rights. At the end of the conference, the delegates publicly acknowledged the role of journalists in the restoration of democracy in Benin, a gesture that paved the way for a parliamentary bill guaranteeing press freedom in Benin." Though this was done during the regime of Martin Kerekou, people would have expected that he will be such a person that will have respect for the ethics of journalism and freedom of expression. But he was fast to blame the media when he lost the presidential election. The ex president was quoted as saying," It was because of journalists that everything has turned out so badly." Ocitti [3] also described the cat and mouse relationship between the media and the Ugandan president's administration thus: "At the height of a public debate on political pluralism in Uganda, Museveni, in an unprovoked outburst, labelled journalists criminals." The Ugandan president who has continued to recycle himself in power was quoted as saying, "Two types of criminals interest me in Uganda, common criminals and journalists." Ocitti [3] gave the names of the following as African leaders that have imprisoned, demeaned and even killed journalists while in power "Togolese president Gnassingbe Eyadema, Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Sudanese President Omar el-Beshir, Cameroonian President Paul Biya, Rwandan President Pasteur Bizimungu, Mozambican President Joachim Chisano and the late General Sani Abacha of Nigeria, to name but a few." He further said "Throughout the continent, parliamentary bills are being enacted to restrict the activities of journalists even further. Somewhat surprisingly, this includes countries like Namibia and Botswana, which have historically exhibited the values and conducts of democracy."

Table 1 represents a summary of African leaders with record of abuses on journalists. Over a decade after the names on this table were published, abuses on journalists and media organisations are still on going in several countries in the continent. Just recently, three Al Jazeera journalists were jailed by the Egyptian government. A female Ethiopian journalist, Reeyot Alemu has been in detention since 2011. According to the media watchdog, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), by the end of 1998, out of the 118 journalists in prison around the world, Ethiopia had twelve, sharing that number with China; Sierra Leone, which in 1997 had no journalist at all in prison, had eleven by the end of 1998; Nigeria, despite making a move towards democracy, still had seventeen by the end of the year. This figure as shown in Table 2 indicates that the number of journalists jailed by the end of 1998 in the three African countries in the table accounts for 34 percent of the total number of prisoners in jail by the end of 1998 the world over. By the time other African countries with one or two prisoners in their jails are added, Africa would have accounted for close to 40 percent of the total figure if not more.

This situation has not improved in the last one decade. More governments within the continent are devising more repressive means to gag journalists in clear violation of the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Countries like Egypt, Eritea and Ethiopia have high cases of jailed journalists. Table 3 provides figures of journalists in detention

Name	Country
Gnassingbe Eyadema	Togo
Daniel Arap Moi	Kenya
Meles Zenawi	Ethiopia
Omar Al-Bashir	Sudan
Paul Biya	Cameroun
Pasteur Bizimungu	Rwanda
Joachim Chisano	Mozambique
Sani Abacha	Nigeria

Table 1: African Leaders with Record of Maltreating Journalists (1980-1998).

Country	Number of Journalists In Jail
Nigeria	17
Sierra Leone	11
Ethiopia	12
Total	50

Table 2: Breakdown of Journalists Jailed in Africa By the End of 1998.

Country	2013	2014
Democratic Republic of Congo	1	1
Congo	1	1
Morocco	-	1
Egypt	5	12
Eritrea	22	23
Rwanda	1	1
Ethiopia	7	17
Gambia	1	1
Somalia	2	2
Cameroun	-	2
Mauritania	-	1
Swaziland	-	1

Table 3: Breakdown of Journalists Jailed in Africa in 2013 and 2014.

in 2013 and 2014 as published by Committee to Protect Journalists. The table corroborates the fact that the number of journalists jailed within the country is increasing instead of reducing. Within just one year, the number of journalists in the country has increased from 40 to 63. This is in a continent that over 90 percent of its countries are claiming to be democratic.

The office of Democracy and Governance in the United States while trying to define the media in governance said, "If the media is to have any meaningful role in democracy, then the ultimate goal of media assistance should be to develop a range of diverse mediums and voices that are credible, and to create and strengthen a sector that promotes such outlets." The office further said, "A media sector supportive of democracy would be one that has a degree of editorial independence, is financially viable, has diverse and plural voices, and serves the public interest." This clearly shows that the media in Africa have a lot of catch-ups to do, considering the fact that media owners hardly give room for editorial independence in their organizations.

The media in Africa as a tool for propaganda

Government owned media in Africa have continued to be used by incumbent governments to deceive their people on projects they have not been able to accomplish after several years in power with nothing to show for the years. According to Anaeto and Solo – Anaeto [4] "the national communication policy in Nigeria spells out the following:

1. The social order within the news media process and communicable needs of the society and how appropriate resources can be organised and harnessed.
2. Organisational and infrastructural facilities for the expression of worldview that advance the country's vision of life as well as the ethical and moral values.
3. A regulatory mechanism that will uphold the freedom of expression and of the press, as well as ensure that the freedom are not used in projecting values contrary to essential basis of society.

In Nigeria, the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), the two state media institutions have been used by government to sing its praises. The government has capitalised on the wide reach of these media to propagate its messages of propaganda to the people. Jowett and O'Donnell [5] define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist." McQuail [2] while trying to give an all-encompassing definition of propaganda said, "in our time, the primary association of propaganda is generally with conflict between states and currently the war against terrorism, but the term can be applied to almost any area where communication is planned to achieve some goal or influence." McQuail [2] further said " the mass media are now regarded as essential to successful war propaganda, since they are the only channels guaranteed to reach the whole public and have the advantage (in open societies) of being trustworthy." It is based on this line of thought that the mass media is being used in Africa as a propaganda tool to brainwash the unsuspecting public especially during political campaigns and awareness campaigns on newly introduced but none functional government policies. McQuail [2] further explained that the historical and present day examples of propaganda in action indicate that there is no single formula, since all depends on the contingent circumstances. "The record also shows that free and independent media can almost as easily be vehicles of well managed propaganda as the media in the hands of autocratic states." This statement suggests that propaganda is not a monopoly of government owned media organisations. With the deregulation of the broadcast media around the globe, new private radio and television stations are being established in many African countries. A closer look at these media organisations further reveals that some influential people in the society who are nursing the ambition of contesting elections or acting as godfathers establish such media organisations with no primary intention of upholding the ethics of journalism, but with the primary aim of using the media to fight the government in power through propaganda and sometimes hate messages. Odunlami [6] captured this correctly when he said, "Many publishers have ludicrously compromised the principles or ideas upon which their media were initially established. For reasons which do not go beyond security or profit maximization, many a Nigerian publisher prefers to hobnob with the government and get juicy contracts in order to be part of the nouveau rich in Nigeria using their media as a tools." A study of the newspapers in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections reveal that the headlines in The Nation newspaper which is owned by a chieftain of the Action Congress of Nigeria, one of the political parties in the country, are more antigovernment but sympathetic to the Action Congress of Nigeria. Similarly, the Africa Independent Television (AIT) which is owned by a member of the ruling People's Democratic Party swung into action as soon as a former president of the country declared his intention to contest in the presidential election. Since the owner of the private television station openly declared his support for the former president, he was given more prominence and airtime as far as advertisements were concerned. While AIT was doing this to Ibrahim Babangida, the NTA was showing live transmissions of the incumbent president's campaign trail at the expense of very important projects that were going on all over the country. This scenario is common within the continent though the magnitude may differ.

Theoritical Framework

The following theories serve as backbone to this paper:

1. Libertarian theory
2. Marxist theory of capitalist media
3. Social responsibility theory

Libertarian theory

According to Odunlami [6] libertarian theory prescribes that an individual should be free to publish what he likes, holding and expressing his or her opinion freely. Folarin explained that libertarian theory advocates that the press must be seen as partner with government

in search of the truth, rather than a tool in the hands of government. Odunlami [6] while commenting on the libertarian theory said "the theory serves as a good guide for media practitioners in their quest to help Nigeria grow."

Social responsibility theory

McQuail [2] summarised the main principles of this theory as follow

1. The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust.
2. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant
3. The media should be free but self-regulated
4. The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conducts
5. Under some circumstances, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest.

Media Ownership and Press Freedom in the United States and Britain

Article 19 of the1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." A strong democracy depends on information and knowledge. The more sources of information we have, the greater our knowledge. The greater our knowledge, the more intelligently we can select our representatives in government at all levels, and the better we can guide their decisions. In Africa, most state owned media are often used by the government as tools for propaganda. A report from the Common Cause Education Fund in 2008 said "media cannot play its role effectively unless it is independent from government influence. A variety of sources of information independent of each other is essential as well. On many issues, media outlets will to varying degrees reflect the interests of their individual owners." It should be noted however that the role of the media is not solely to make profits for the owning corporations. The media is to serve the public interest, and may make money while doing so. A closer look at the relationship between media ownership and democracy in countries known to uphold freedom of expression for decades will give us a clear light of how much work needed to make this union a strong one that will bring about political stability and democracy in Africa.

USA

According to McQuail [2] "The movement towards codifying journalistic practice had already started in the USA before the 1947 Hutchins committee report, and one of the first canons of journalism was published by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1923." In the United States, freedom of the press is clearly enshrined in the laws of the land. A report from the Common Cause Education Fund in 2008 said "The only industry explicitly protected in the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution is the media. The reason is fundamental: In a healthy democracy, those who disseminate information must not be fettered in their role of holding government accountable. The founders of our country understood this and made sure that "freedom of the press" was clearly stated in the highest law of the land." The influence of ownership cannot be completely taken away from media organisations since those who set up such organisations did so with the aim of making profit. However, a free press will help in building the democracy of a country. Baran [7] said "our democracy exists on a foundation of self-governance and free and responsible mass media are essential to both democracy and self-governance. But media because of their power and the often conflicting demands of profit and service under which they operate are open to control." While emphasising on the need for a free press devoid of ownership or government control, a United States judge, Justice Tom Clark wrote saying "the free press has been a mighty catalyst in awakening public interest in governmental affairs, exposing corruption among public officers and employees and generally informing the citizenry of public events and occurrences..." the deregulation of the media has affected the way the media looks at issues. Baran [7] said "the difficulty of balancing the public interest and broadcasters' freedom is at the heart of the debate over deregulation and the relaxation of ownership and other rules for radio and television." The influence of ownership and control on the media differ from country to country. In the United States of America, Dominick [8] said "the United States and other western countries have a tradition of press freedom the government recognizes the right of media to present ideas to try to persuade the audience to some point of view." The media in the United States are usually more pro people than pro government, the information carried by these media are in many cases critical on government and its policies. This is something that is unheard of in Africa and other developing countries of the world. In Africa, the government uses state laws to suppress the views of a critical. Domonick [8] said "an examination of the press in the United States and Canada for example, would reveal a large amount of news about the local and national government, some of it unfavourable and critical." Under this atmosphere, the press acts as a watchdog, keeping a check on the activities of government and reporting to the public. This usually makes the government to be conscious of criticisms and to live up to their constitutional obligations.

The United Kingdom

According to Gripsrud [9], "broadcasting has usually required some form of statutory regulation." This statement can cover even the other media of mass communication. In the United Kingdom, Branston and Stafford [10] said "if the UK government decides to regulate, it must take account of European Union policy and the implication of the global media market. The author outlined the following six types of regulation that can be used by the different governments in the world:

1. Direct control by government
2. Delegation by government to an independent statutory regulator
3. Self-regulation by media producers
4. The general legal framework as a restraint
5. Market forces regulate
6. Audience pressure regulates

Though 4 to 5 on that list can be found in even authocratic governments, the United Kingdom practices 2. Branston and Stafford [10] said "this is the current system used in the UK for commercial radio, television and telecommunications with Ofcom as the regulator, established by an act of parliament." The independence of the British Broadcasting Corporation from government manipulation is something that developing countries need to copy.

Conclusion

Most Africans are fast at condemning government for using state media as agents of propaganda. Politicians in the opposition parties usually cash in on this common crime by African governments while trying to score cheap political points. But government is not the only culprit when it comes to the issue of ownership and control. Private media owners have also used their media to push forward their political ambitions or that of their political parties. The media are supposed to be used as tools for propagating developmental messages and media professionals owe a duty to society to report events in their correct perspectives and not coloring it to suite particular people or organizations. In a developing continent like Africa, the mass media remain the best option for government to bring development to the public. A close partnership between governments in Africa and the mass media will help development in the continent. There is need to put an end to this cat and mouse situation and focus on progress.

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