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Review of Topical Issues in the Management of Nigerian Newspaper Organisations

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Abstract

Growth is a phenomenon, a decline is also in itself a stage in the life circle of a phenomenon, but when the decline is unusually higher than growth as in the Nigeria newspaper industry, and it calls for examination. This paper examined major topical issues affecting the growth of newspaper organisations in Nigeria. Using conceptual review, issues on media ownership, media leadership, economic clime, professional ethics, staff welfare, newspaper distributors/agents influence, internet influence and government harassment of journalists and media organisation were discussed. It was established that any media organisation which fails to respond to the issues positively will find growth a difficult task. In view of this therefore, the paper, concludes that media owners, government and other stakeholders must be proactive and faithfully play their parts, as the growth and sustainability of newspaper business is a necessity for the benefit of the investors and the society at large.

Keywords: Growth; Management; Newspaper organisation; Sustainability; Topical issues

Introduction:

Every newspaper organisation desires growth in order to just not survive but be sustainable. Fidelity to organisational goals and objectives is a key factor that would help any organisation including those that are established for newspaper business grow and attain sustainability. The attainment of these goals and objectives is a fundamental function of organizational leadership which addresses basic issues that are intricately tied to the survival of the newspaper business globally and most especially in Nigeria. These issues include ownership influence, leadership competence; government policies and harassment; newspaper funding and economy; newspaper distributors/agents; ethical issue and staff welfare among others.

Newspaper business operates in an aggressive competitive global market prompted by economic pressure and the demand for efficiency, productivity and sustainability. Newspaper business in its bid for growth and sustainability is beset globally with slumping advertisement sales and precipitous drops in circulation. According to Saba (2009), in recent years the number of newspapers slated for closure, bankruptcy or severe cutbacks have risen, especially in the United States, where since 2001, the industry has shed a fifth of its journalists. Revenue has plunged while competition from Internet media has squeezed older print publishers (Newspaper Overview, 2009). World Association of Newspapers (2018) reported effort made by newspaper leadership in Britain. To survive, the newspapers had to simply diversify and focus primarily on the entertainment industry as less than 20 percent of its content is allocated to political, economic and social issues (Curran & Seaton, 2013).

In recent years, the landscape of operation within the newspaper industry has undergone a transformation as a result of technology. From Gutenberg's printing press to the automated printing process technology has been at the core of every revolution that has characterised the newspaper industry. Although Obijiofor and Green (2001) hold an optimistic view that the future of newspapers is bright, this has to be taken with great caution. They see a lot of inherent qualities that traditional newspapers possess which enable them to withstand the internet news revolution. The reality however is that there are several reasons to worry, especially since the internet is encroaching into newspapers' audiences and their advertising revenue, not to mention the proliferation of news sources on the internet (Solomon, 2014).

This steady incursion into the audience and advertising revenue of the newspaper is a major reason many believe that one of the riskiest enterprises in the Nigerian business environment is newspaper publishing. The issues responsible for the decline and slow growth rate are worth looking into.

The discussion in this paper is guided by the contingency theory of organisational management which according to Morgan (2007) considers optimal course of action as being dependent on the internal and external business environment. To this end, there is no best way to organise a corporation for a sustainability. Instead, each organisational leadership must study their business environment very critically and come up with the best proactive measure which the time and environment of operation dictates. As it applies to the Nigerian situation, sustainable newspaper management must hinge on the control the leadership of newspaper organisations hold over the situation. It calls for ingenuity on the part of the leadership.

Statement of the Problem

A very significant feature of the newspaper business in Nigeria is that of high mortality rate. Agbaje (2005) for instance, observes that Nigerian media history has witnessed the demise rather than the growth of several newspapers. Between 1859 when Henry Townsend's *Iwe Irohin,* (the first newspaper with traceable records of its production and management, was published in Abeokuta) and 2010, Nigeria had had on its newsstand 103 newspapers and 59 magazines (Ige, 2013 p.84-94). While some of the titles are still surviving and indeed thriving many more have been rested. A disturbing notable feature therefore, of newspaper publication in Nigeria is the relative ease with which many of the titles go into oblivion. For instance, of the 103 newspapers listed by Ige (2013), less than ten survived for more than two decades. Between the period of 1980 and 2000, some 43 major newspapers were established out of which 29 have since ceased publication (Adebanwi, 2002). By 2007, Nigeria was serviced by over 85 daily, weekly, bi-weekly registered publications (Akinfeleye, 2008), only very few of these are managing to survive. This again attests to the high mortality of Nigerian newspapers than growth. A combination of factors no doubt would be responsible for the low fortune of the newspaper business in Nigeria. It is for this purpose that this paper set out to conceptually review these factors which affect the growth and management of newspaper organisations in Nigeria.

Methodology

As the title indicates, this paper is a critical review of extant literature on major issues affecting newspaper management in Nigeria. To that extent, the discussion will rely on analytic survey of available literature.

Evolution and Growth of Newspapers in Nigeria

Nigerian media scholars consider Reverend Henry Townsend, of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) as the pioneer proprietor of the newspaper business in Nigeria with the establishment on December 3, 1859 of the Yoruba language newspaper, *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba* (Ige, 2013). This is a challenge to both media scholars and media historians because history records that Reverend Masterton Hope Waddell of the Presbyterian Church had earlier settled in Calabar in 1842 and in fact commenced publishing books, pamphlets and newspapers. The challenge therefore is to unearth the actual date of the Calabar newspapers. That however is food for thought and a discussion for a later time. Whichever way, it is an indisputable fact that Christianity is the precursor of newspaper business in Nigeria. This is why some scholars believe that the history of the press in Nigeria and that of Christianity is interwoven (Oluwajuyitan, 2008). Henry Townsend thus became the first newspaper publisher in the history of Nigeria.

Other newspapers that followed after the two missionaries (Reverend Masterton Hope Waddell and Reverend Henry Townsend) soon began to benefit from the growing interest in reading and writing which western education brought. Furthermore, the urge for self-government spurred Nigerians to organise mass movements to challenge colonial repression. Mass media and indeed the newspaper, became a ready tool used to challenge colonialism. In British colonies of the East, West and South Africa, the promise of eventual independence led the people to organise nationalist movements. The growth of these movements led directly to the birth of small newspapers (Ukonu, 2005). Therefore, before any media ownership laws were enacted, colonialism and the struggle for self-governance triggered private ownership of the mass media. The British government also went into publishing, though it did not float a full fledge newspaper. "Part of their communication structure in Nigeria was in form of colonial information hand-outs. In Southern Nigeria, the colonial administration effectively used its periodical, the Nigerian Gazette, which was established in Lagos. The Gazette was published in bond volumes like weekly or monthly magazines. It was therefore not a conventional publication. While the British government wanted to spread information about its administration with its publication, mercantilist and nationalistic motives propelled the private press (Ukonu, 2005).

The quest for independence, additionally, led many nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Ernest Ikoli, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo to name a few into establishing papers. Macaulay formed the first party paper, the Lagos Daily News in 1925 to champion the cause of his party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). This trend sparked off an era of party papers – the Daily News, 1925; Daily Service, 1933; the West African Pilot, 1937, and The Tribune in 1948 were effective party organs. Party papers continued to exist up to the post-independence era. After independence, three regions (North, West and East) had ethnic-based political parties and the private press aligned with the trend. The Pilot and the Zik's chain of papers, the Nigerian Tribune and the Nigerian Citizen became the mouthpieces of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) – East; the Action Group– West; and the Northern People's Congress – North respectively. And with the creation of 12 states in 1967, each state established its own newspaper. This practice continued as state creation continued. The newspaper industry in Nigeria has, no doubt, gone through trying times and has become very strong and audacious and has built itself a great name (Ukonu, 2005).

A casual reading of the brief history of the commencement of newspaper work in Nigeria may give a misleading hint that the only concern of newspaper proprietorship is social service, politics and ego drive of the proprietors. This may not be the entire fact. After all, every investment is business which at least demands a return on investment and sustainability. In this regard, the postulation of Crosby (2019) on the need for organisations to pursue growth and sustainability regardless of the other reasons for which they are established is worth considering. Working on this premise, this paper shall critically review the major topical issues affecting newspaper management in Nigeria under seven broad categories. These are, ownership interest and influence, leadership competence and staff management, conflict with the government, poor economic climate, challenge of journalism ethics, role of newspaper distributors and agents, and incursion of the internet and new media technology.

Ownership Interest and Influence

The general assumption is that the owners of the media influence the content and form of media through their decisions to employ certain personnel, fund special projects, and by providing a media platform for the ideological interest group. Hence, the media are turned into an indispensable tool for retaining and promoting the power of their owners (Daramola, 2015). There are two types of ownership in the Nigerian media: government and privately owned. The ownership pattern is, therefore, an important factor in determining the direction and growth of a particular news medium. Agbaje, (2005), identifies government ownership as a major problem of the Nigerian media.

It is, therefore, not completely surprising that Akinfeleye (2008) has advocated a separation between the function of the journalists and the investors. In his submission, investors should look for money to run the business while journalists with managerial skills and competency should be allowed to run the business and be responsible for the growth or otherwise, to avoid unnecessary conflicts. This suggestion may, however, not be feasible in the Nigerian context where investors and journalists treat themselves with mutual suspicion. Investors believe that "he that pays the piper dictates the tunes", and moreover, quite often regard journalists as people who spend recklessly, if not adequately monitored. Journalists, on the other hand, see investors as people waiting to get rid of them at the slightest sign of conflict once the business begins to be profitable.

The ownership interest fact is not peculiar to Nigeria as every investor has a reason for floating a paper. In the West, for example, editorial pressures do occur from the publishers who are closely linked to the wielders of power, but these do not lead to newspaper collapse because these publishers know when to stop as they can curtail their personal interests so that the papers will not lose public goodwill and collapse (Chomsky, 2009). In Britain, for example, monopoly ownership is the rule of the game (Keeble, 2008). Examples are newspapers owned by the media mogul, Rupert Murdoch. Therefore, the Nigerian newspaper owners may be exhibiting some peculiar characteristics that may be a factor in newspaper collapse.

Leadership Competence and Staff Management

No organisation can grow beyond the capacity of its leadership. Germano, (2010) substantiated this assertion by averring that leadership has a direct cause and effect relationship upon organisations and their successes. Since newspaper work is also a business concern, its leaders and managers must not be oblivious of the importance of leadership in the growth of any media organization. Contemporary managers shape institutional strategies including their execution and effectiveness. Leaders can appear at any level of a newspaper organisation and are not exclusive to management. Successful leaders do, however, according to Germano, (2010) have one thing in common. They influence those around them in order to reap maximum benefits from the organisation's human and capital resources.

The current working conditions of journalists in Africa represent a major impediment to their capacity to perform in line with professional ethics, professional obligations and to see to the growth of the newspaper business. (Baglo, 2008). In Nigeria for example, as obtains in most African countries, most journalists have no job security. They are denied all forms of social security, health benefit, or other forms of social welfare benefits. This is a shortfall on leadership which contributes significantly to the low fortune of newspaper organisations in Nigeria. This paper shares the view of Andrazej (2015), on the need for leadership to translate potentials into reality. That is why the call by Baglo (2008), on media leadership to design t collective bargaining standard framework that would to a large extent determine the remuneration and total welfare of journalists should not be overlooked. This is against the backdrop of the assertion of Ekhareafo, (2013), that the art and science of newspaper management in contemporary societies have become more challenging given the rate of decline the industry has witnessed over the years.

Effective leadership also involves motivation, management, inspiration, remuneration, and analytical skills; which is apparently absent in most media houses in Nigeria. When all these are present, the organisations' record increased employee satisfaction that positively influences productivity, growth, and profits. The positive effect of leadership on organisational performance was measured by some researchers (Sila & Ebrahimpour, 2015) through human resources (turnover rate and job performance), organizational effectiveness (cost and quality) and financial performance (market share, profit, and return on asset). To increase the organisational performance, leaders in the media industry must have the ability

to promote creativity and innovation, stimulate the subordinates to challenge their own value systems and improve their individual performance.

Incessant Conflict with the Government

One major factor that has negatively affected the growth of the newspaper in Nigeria over the years is incessant conflict with the Government. Government and her agencies frequently harass newspaper organisations and their personnel. Harassment from the government has made journalism in Nigeria a hazardous profession. No wonder, freedom of the press in Nigeria is perceived as only being guaranteed on paper (Akinfeleye, 2008). Adebanwi (2008), Daramola (2003) and Olukotun (2002) have in different ways decried the negative stance the Nigerian government maintains with journalists.

The plight of the Nigerian media manager is in sharp contrast with that of his American counterpart who has the full backing of the constitution of the United States. This is why many media expert and practitioners have concluded that the government is the greatest enemy of the media in Nigeria because of its inability to create a conducive atmosphere for them to operate, thus, stiffening growth. (Ayedun-Aluma, 2008). One dangerous trend is the government's subtle way of giving advertisements to only those newspapers that support its policies, hitting at the jugular of those newspapers regarded as anti-government. This reduces the capacity of Nigerian newspapers to criticise their governments since their major source of revenue may be blocked by the rulers of the day.

Poor Economic Climate

The economic clime where a newspaper organisation operates is a significant factor for assessing its growth. The Nigerian economy was officially declared to be depressed in 2015 after several years of window dressing. The unfavourable Nigerian economy is a great threat to the existence of the media (Ekpu, 2002). Obaigbena (2001, p. 1) believes that the greatest challenge media managers faced is that of declining readership resulting from low economic power. According to him, "readership is not merely declining, it has virtually collapsed. Olorunyomi (2002, p. 6) echoes Obaigbena that "the Nigeria newspaper press is heading for the morgue" because of diminishing readership. Hence, media managers have to be proactive and extremely creative to survive (Jimada, 2006). Akinwunmi (2008) puts the current economic problem in perspective, comparing the situation in the past with the present:

> In this same country a few years ago, the Times group did over 600,000 copies on Sundays! Many of the so-called national newspapers sometimes don't do more than 20,000 or 30,000 copies and are mostly seen in Lagos, Abuja and maybe, Port Harcourt. With this drop in circulation, it has become even more difficult to reach consumers through this Medium." (p. 12)

Another aspect of the problem examined by Onyima (2005, p. 3) was Nigeria's current literacy level of 57%. According to UNESCO in 2015, affirmed that over 65million Nigerian are illiterate. It means that the average ratio of newspaper readership vis-a-vis the literate population is less than 100 copies per 288,000 literate persons. This figure is totally far from UNESCO's minimum standard of 100 copies per 1000 literate persons.

How much of newspaper collapse in Nigeria can, really, be attributed to the economy? While it is true that the newspaper is undergoing some of the most wrenching and dramatic changes since the advent of movable type" (Sirotsky, 2008, p. 3) and digital technology is re-writing the economics of news publishing (Osazee-odia, 2008), this cannot, totally, explain why newspapers are collapsing in Nigeria. Newspapers in Britain and other western nations for example, are facing reduced readership but they are

not collapsing (Gall, 2002).). Even newspapers that are distributed free are growing and making profits through advertisements (Compos, 2008).

Challenge of Journalism Ethics

The newspaper business is an enterprise that strives on public trust. The growth and success of any media are hinged on the perceived trust by the reading public. Where this is betrayed decline is inevitable. The press in Nigeria has often been accused of many ethical sins. Ethical inadequacies like bias in reportage, "cash for the editorial", brown envelope, imbalance of news stories, and defamation of character among others. This is a very serious matter, according to Uche (2009), the Nigerian press is held in low esteem because of its incompetence while the media are sometimes employed as instruments of domination. To Akinfeleye (2010), however, the problem of the Nigeria press is foundational. Journalists are lacking in holistic training as quite often, they present an atmosphere of being ill-informed (Ademulegun, 2003).

According to Oseni (2002), who shares almost the same view, the press misunderstands freedom as a license to publish unscrupulously. Ogundimu (2008), is of the view that media ethics are not enforced and, therefore, Nigerian journalists behave unethically. The following empirical data seem to corroborate this view. Okoro and Ugwuayi (2006), after studying journalists in four southwest states and one North-Central state in Nigeria found that 54.2 per cent of journalists viewed brown envelope as material while 51.4 per cent did not see acceptance of brown envelope as unethical. In a similar survey of 184 journalist from ten different media organisations in Lagos by Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2009), 61 per cent of the respondents said the habitually receive brown envelopes on reporting assignments, While 39 per cent rejected it. On whether "brown envelopes encourage favourable coverage of the giving organization'', 74 per cent of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the claim.

Nwabueze, (2010) in a study on Nigerian journalists' perception of brown envelope and the need for ethical reorientation, using a sample of 150 journalists found that 70 per cent of the respondents saw brown envelope as a gift/kind gesture from media users rather than a bribe. Eighty four per cent agreed that they accept brown envelope in the course of duty while majority of respondents (78 per cent) indicated that acceptance of brown envelope does not affect objectivity in news reporting. The same study revealed that 43 per cent of the respondents agreed that poor remuneration is the basic reason for acceptance of brown envelope. On whether journalists who accept gratifications would continue to do even if their salaries were to be increased, 37 per cent of the respondents said some of them would still accept brown envelopes; 27 said few would still accept, while twenty per cent said most would still accept. The study further showed that 12 per cent of the respondents said if salaries were to be increased, all journalists would still accept brown envelopes, while four per cent said no journalist would take brown envelope if salaries were increased.

Such display of unethical behaviour by journalists in the course of their duties is, however, just one aspect of the ethical problem. Media owners and managers also engage in unethical practices in order to keep their businesses from collapsing. An example is the case of managers receiving contracts from government officials in exchange for spiking stories not complementary to them. This no doubt contributes significantly to corruption in the media. The risk is that when such an owner dies, the paper collapses because it was not founded on free-market principles that cannot be kept going when the owner is not there**.**

Role of Newspaper Distributors and Agents

Newspaper distributors otherwise called agents occupy a very important and strategic role in the effective distribution of newspapers in Nigeria. Their key role in getting the final products to the consumers cannot be overemphasized. In the chain of distribution of a newspaper, a typical agent or vendor is next to the

consumer. A newspaper is made or marred by newspaper distributors/agents, in part, because newspaper consumers only buy papers that the distributors display.

The normal practice in the industry is that distributors will collect newspaper without paying any money, if a distributor collects 100 copies and he sells 50 copies, he will pay for only 50 copies less his commission. The newspaper company has to bear the loss of the 50 unsold copies. It then implies that they share from profit without sharing in the loss. They do this for all newspapers; hence they make more money than newspaper companies. Adedayo (2006) vividly portrayed the harrowing experience of newspaper proprietors in the hands of unscrupulous distributors and agents

The reality today is that the structure of newspaper distribution in the country makes it almost impossible to ignore, or bye-pass the agents. The level of competition in the industry also makes such a move unwise. Attempts by newspaper houses to create a new set of in-house distributors have only succeeded in creating limited awareness. It has not improved sales in any significant way. Unless other means are discovered, the newspaper distributors would continue to have their way for a long time to come. The most evil being perpetrated by these newspaper distributors is to sell newspaper copies and not return sales proceeds to the newspaper organisations; this accusation has been severally denied by the newspaper distributors and agents.

Incursion of the Internet and New Media Technology

Over the years, print newspapers have faced challenges with the invention of the telegraph, the radio, and television. In spite of this, publishers have always adapted and persevered. However, with the advent of the Internet and its attendant new media technology, more pressure is put on the traditional newspaper model. Small and large newspaper organisations alike are faced with the choice of abandoning their traditional methods for a more innovative approach or face extinction (Taylor, 2019).

Such significant aspects of advertising revenue, staffing, production and distribution channels are greatly affected. Coupled with weakening economy, revenues from daily newspaper advertising has dropped substantially, whereas the internet is experiencing an increase in advertising revenue. Readers demand instant access to news, so newspapers are compelled to create online presence. Some of these editions are free, while others are offered at a reduced rate or licensed through digital media, such as the Kindle, Nook or iPhone. The implication is a drastic fall in advertisement revenue which is the main source of revenue for newspapers. Faced with such challenges, newspapers have no choice but to adapt.

This is why application of contingency theory is a necessity. There is an urgent demands for paradigm shift in newspaper management and organisation in Nigeria. Adaptation is not a choice but a mandate if Nigerian newspapers have to remain afloat. Management and entire workforce have to retool but in ideology and in practice for the Internet and new media technology have come to stay. They will continue to determine and shape the nature of newspaper business.

Conclusion

This conceptual review examined compelling issues that affect newspaper growth in Nigeria. A decline is a stage in the life circle of a phenomenon, but when the decline is unusually higher than growth as in Nigeria newspaper industry, it calls for examination. This work, therefore, wishes to conclude that frank and deliberate effort must be taken by all stakeholders to ensure the sustainability and growth of the newspaper industry in Nigeria.

Media Owners must realise that newspaper business had gone beyond using it as a tool for personal interest or for political purposes alone, but should be viewed as a business venture that should be run with all principles and ideals of business organisations that is globally accepted; if they desire to have an organisation that will outlive them. Secondly, competent leadership must be provided if the organisation must grow. The era of leaving the leadership affairs of newspaper organisations to the hands of untrained managers are far gone. Managing Director/Editor-in-Chief (EIC) must be a seasoned business administrator in addition to being trained primarily as a journalist. Similarly, criteria must be used for other line managers across all departments within a newspaper organisation.

Understanding of the economic indices is a quality that EIC must possess and the ability to run the organisation with little or no harassment from the government by practicing responsible and developmental journalism. Training and re-training of the staff are highly recommended, in order to keep your staff abreast of the latest skills, types of equipment and technology required for effective and responsible journalism. Hence, necessary work tools and conducive environment must be provided.

Professional ethical compliance can only be achieved if staff salaries, benefits, emoluments, and the general welfare of the staff are the priority of the management. A situation where these are missing, professional ethical practices will be at its lowest ebb.

This paper strongly recommends that newspaper managers must ensure good and endurable affinity between the newspaper organisation and the newspaper distributors and vendor as the industry still depends on them for the distribution of their newspapers. Also ensuring prompt and effective collection of their sales proceeds, as this marks the end of a successful business transaction. Meanwhile, the government must provide a level playing ground for media generally to grow, because, the government itself cannot survive without the media. Hence, necessary incentives like tax waivers on newsprints and other printing machines that can enhance the growth of the newspaper industry.

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