

# **Press Responsibility and Public Opinion in Political Transition**

**by Noma Owens-Ibie**

## **Abstract**

The paper discusses the themes of press responsibility and public opinion and their relevance within the current socio-political economic frameworks of African nations. It stresses the pertinent role of a democratized press in democratic political systems, and the role that the press can play within the democracies if they are conscious of the great responsibility that the current transition programmes of African nations places on them.

In view of the rise of so many elites in Africa (those who almost always make headline news) and their great influence in mass media output as well as the economic considerations of many media organisations in news judgement, the paper reasserts the deep ethical and professional commitment of the mass media to protecting the underprivileged in society, interpreting their points of view and acting as the voice of the voiceless in society.

The paper concludes that a holistic transition programme that recognises less government presence in mass media management and output is ideal for African nations. It also calls for more professional running of the press in Africa to ensure that they fit properly as society's watchdog, the fourth estate of the realm.

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# **Les Responsabilités de la Presse et l'Opinion Publique dans un Contexte de Transition Politique**

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## **Résumé**

Cet exposé se penche sur les thèmes de la responsabilité de la presse et de l'opinion publique ainsi que sur leur pertinence aux contextes socio-politiques et économiques des nations africaines. Il met l'accent sur le rôle, qu'il juge pertinent, d'une presse démocratisée, au sein des systèmes politiques démocratiques, ainsi que sur le rôle qui peut être celui de la presse au sein des démocraties à condition, cependant, qu'elle prenne conscience des grandes responsabilités qu'elle est appelée à jouer dans les programmes de transition que poursuivent actuellement les nations africaines.

En ce qui concerne l'émergence d'un si grand nombre d'élites en Afrique (ceux-là mêmes qui sont toujours à la une des journaux) et leur emprise sur la production médiatique, sans oublier l'influence qu'exercent les intérêts économiques en matière de sélection des informations dans le monde des médias, l'exposé souligne la nécessité de l'engagement tant éthique que professionnel qui doit être celui des médias quant à la protection des membres sous-privilegiés de la société et l'interprétation de leurs points de vue. Selon l'exposé, la presse se doit d'être la voix des sans voix dans la société.

En conclusion, l'exposé reconnaît qu'un programme de transition qui accorderait un rôle minime au gouvernement tant dans la gestion que dans la production sur le plan médiatique fournirait l'arrangement idéal pour les nations africaines. L'exposé, avance, enfin, que la presse devrait être gérée par des professionnels, si elle doit être à la hauteur du rôle qui est le sien: celui du chien de garde de la société.



## **Introduction**

A treatise on the ethics of the media is always high on the agenda of media watchers and critics in developed nations. This, however, has not made mass media practice in those lands free from ethical shortcomings. Within developing nations, however (especially those in the continent of Africa), media ethics does not command much serious consideration. This often results from the so called 'realities' in the environment of media practice, which forces practitioners to do the best they can in the face of all odds.

It is a truism that democratic societies are the best grounds for maximum appreciation of the ethics of the mass media (Klaidman and Beauchamp, 1987). That is why any nation that desires democratic systems of government should also aspire to a democratised press systems, where standards of judgement and practice are not only taught in journalism training institutions but are adequately exercised in the most sincere ways possible.

In societies that are used to an obtuse version of journalistic practice, a rigorous re-orientation becomes inevitable. Thus, political leaders are schooled on the rewards of leaving the mass media to do their jobs properly, and the press readjusts its priorities to conform to ethical and professional standards, in an honest search for societal liberty and progress. In Africa, this is what "transition" means or should mean; not just political transition, but a holistic societal transition.

## **What is Press Responsibility?**

This question has been asked for decades by intellectuals and professionals in media practice. No generally agreeable definition has been reached. And as long as societies differ, none may be reached. The four-part categorisation of Hodges (1986) may provided a working definition in this paper. The writer sees press responsibility as comprising political, educational, utility and cultural functions. Here, the mass media are expected to inform the citizenry of what goes on in government, which, in a way, keeps rulers in check. Also, the media should be reporting on and promoting discussion of ideas, opinions and truths toward the end of social refinement"; acting as a nation's "bulletin board" for information and mirroring the society and its peoples just the way they are, thus exposing the heroes and the villains.

These functions should normally be spread across the mass media,

...Whether the media are privately or governmentally owned, whether or not the controlling news judgements are made within the news organisation itself or by an outside agency (Elliott 1986:34).

It is a sincere hope, therefore, to expect the mass media to present wide-ranging accurate information on the polity, educative items adjudged to be in the interest of their audiences and mirror, as accurately as they can, the society of which they are part.

Providing exhaustive information does not compel the mass media to give news on every thing that happens daily. This is not possible and is not a measure of journalistic responsibility. Every media outlet has its limitations in terms of volume of output. What is judged is not how much information is not presented, but rather the fair judgement of the editors on what should be used and what should not. For as Denton and Woodward (1985) say,

It would be naive to assume that what is reported in any medium represents all the news. The sheer number of human events that would qualify as newsworthy will always outstrip the capacity of any number of channels available at any given time.

Ultimately, fair judgement in the news selection process is the yardstick for measuring responsibility rather than degree of coverage of total news content.

It is part of the news judgement criteria that subtly guides what issues dominate public agenda, as Lippmann (1930) accurately observed many years ago:

The Press is like the beam of a searchlight that mores restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision.

The "episodes" in this case are not discovered; they are only being highlighted or brought to the fore of public consciousness. The beam of a searchlight is guided by the sincere aim of letting audiences of the mass media know what is adjudged right for them to know. This is in keeping with audience expectations of the press as the conscience of the mass audience. Says Ekpu (1990):

Journalism is an endeavour in service of the public good; journalists must be just as dedicated to that good as they are to high professional standards.

The question of the degree of success in the performance of these roles also leads to a diversity of answers. No society is perfect and no press anywhere in the world adequately fulfils these expectations without a fault. But most democratic societies are appropriate environments for



the press to aspire unto certain heights in the discharge of their responsibilities. Even countries like India, Israel and Pakistan have created environments for their mass media systems to thrive. This is however lacking in most African countries, including Nigeria. Egbon (1988:56) observes that

One deduction that can be drawn here is that most of these Nigerian newspapers are incapable of giving adequate service to the masses of this nation because of the hounding fear of molestation from the government if they overstepped their bounds. So instead of the press acting like the watchdog of the people as the case should normally be it remains a chained dog which can only bark but cannot bite.

The Nigerian press, it is clear, has certain unwritten limitations in the discharge of their responsibilities to the audience. So while on one hand views are expressed for the "unchaining" of the press, counter views are expressed that Nigeria has the "freest press in Africa". This often amusing debate has not improved the performance of the Nigerian press in their responsibility to the Nigerian audience. Instead, practitioners seem to live in fear and therefore exercise utmost caution at incurring the sanction of certain regulations and measures ostensibly laid down to sanitize mass media practice.

The Nigerian environment is not ideal for unreserved press commitment to the standards and ethics of the profession, more so in a military system of government. Ekpu (1990) observes:

Journalism is a dangerous venture in the developing world especially where military governments rule. No method of reprisal seem too severe to use against a press that dares to adopt an independent and critical stance. The arbitrary treatment meted out to *Newswatch* is a case in point. The magazine was "convicted"—without benefit of anything even resembling due process—of an "offence" (sic) which did not even exist at the time it was supposedly committed. The decree of proscription was promulgated after the ban was announced and then backdated—a flagrant example of ex Post facto legislation.

This lament pictures an aspect of the kind of numerous sanctions that could be faced in developing nations. It clearly shows that some media organisations may seem to have genuine reasons to play safe, at the expense of their professional obligations. It indicates why some practitioners would compromise their stand on issues, or publish slanted news. In such a crisis or professional conflict, the way out always seems to be to give in to the legislative and extra-legislative sanctions, which also include increases in tariffs on production materials, as well as withdrawal of advertisements by government

bodies. But the questions would be: Are mass media professional standards and ethics negotiable? In the face of the multiple restrictions of mass media practice in developing countries are they justified in parading themselves as society's watchdog, the fourth estate of the realm?

## **Accountability as an Indicator of Responsibility**

It has been observed that responsibility is often used as a synonym for accountability, a practice which is quite erroneous (Hodges, 1986). According to the writer, simple grammatical usage makes us know that we are responsible "for" and accountable "to". In simple terms, accountability would mean the ultimate judge of one's actions or someone perceived to be the ultimate judge and rewarder of one's actions.

The presence of regulations guiding the activities of the mass media is not strange in any society. Every profession needs a set of rules to ensure proper practice. What exists in many developing countries is that these regulations are often only interpretable by those who established them or have the power to enforce them. This leaves much room for legal manoeuvres. It also makes practitioners very cautious in the practice of their duties.

In Nigeria, regulations and laws also exist that help regulate the function of the mass media. So, control within the limits of these charters, decrees and edicts would appear to be legitimate (Nwuneli, 1985).

To whom then are the mass media accountable? It should be the entire society. To their audiences, who they owe correct news reportage, analysis and editorialising. To government, which they owe constructive criticism, a relay of popular opinion and adequate feedback from the populace. To their proprietor, who they owe the survival of the media organisation as a business venture as well as a veritable source of education, enlightenment and entertainment. To themselves, whom they owe fulfilment in their calling, satisfaction and an entire success story. When any of these "judges" of journalistic responsibility is shunted, accountability is dented and automatically, responsibility is affected adversely.

Graber (1980) has observed that "most institutions within any particular political system go along with it if they wish to prosper". This may appear a sweeping statement, but it does reflect the present state of media practice in many developing nations. Where a media organisation must survive and be healthy, it chooses to be accountable only to government, and after, to the proprietors also (if it is privately



owned). Prosperity to Graber may be hindered through mainly economic means. In Nigeria, for example, there are several other measures aimed at redirecting the media to desired expectations. I have been examined before now, they include arrests of media personnel, proscription of publication, harassment by state security personnel, etc.

Denton and Woodward (1985) highlight two journalistic practices that shy away from their roles. First is the "we give you all the facts" syndrome, which absolves the press from all possible interpretations that their audiences could give to their presentations, as well as aiming to prevent them in a convenient objective and truthful light. This act, incidentally, hijacks from the media the role of interpreter, analyst and commentator, and leaves such responsibility to whoever wishes to fill the void.

Second is the over-dependence on government news sources, and a false establishment of the role of a faultless news source to a government agent. The logic is to present government as "all-knowing" giving it the right to get away with sometimes unqualified slips in judgement, as well as painting those who disagree with those views as ill-informed, unfair or hypercritical. One notable result of this is that truth is seen as "official truth" rather than "truth".

Similarly, in almost any government, the implication would be that where the government in power feels a threat to its views, it exploits such cordial relations with the press through lavish press conferences where the "whole truth" is presented to the media representatives. These almost always make headline news, with little or no room for dissenting opinions. Such opinions, where they come, are shuffled into obscure positions of the media organ where they would not contradict or endanger "official" or "authoritative" information.

Egbon (1988) has noted that "... (mass media) communication has power to shape government, both its policies and its leaders".

Meyer, (1987) has also observed that the diverse audiences,

...Cause a lot of trouble for the mass media. The masses of people contain many diverse interests and conflicting viewpoints. Striking a balance among the differences and treating everyone evenhandedly is the editor's most difficult job.

While he may be right to some extent, an editor is not necessarily supposed to lose sleep over how to please his readers if he has not had cause to displease them before. Editors are supposed to justify the placement of relevant information in their media organs. This is done when all feedback systems have been harnessed and synthesised. If the audiences are not complaining and if patronage is not declining,

there is no immediate problem. The mass media should then, in line with Egbon's observation, see how they can re-order their accountability by focusing, on behalf of their mass audiences, more realistically on questionable government officials and controversial government policies.

There is the business side of the issue. In the face of mounting economic problems, how does an organisation perform its role as "watchdog" and not offend an "ally" in the business front? Rivers and Mathews (1988) observe that,

In a world of conglomerates, it may be more difficult for editors to protect journalistic judgements against marketing judgement.

There is often an overlap of values. If the organisation does not survive as a business venture, it will surely collapse as a mass media venture. Thus, media managers are very careful to avoid a conflict of interest and judgement. In some cases, this crisis is personified in the frequent appearances of proprietors, and in some cases, an imposition of ideas by the proprietors on the editorial staff.

Meyer (1987) has also noted that,

The best publisher, in journalistic folklore, is one who never shows up. The tradition of separation of news and business sides in its extreme extension, is interpreted by a few to mean that not even the publisher should have anything to say about what goes into the newspaper. In reality, however, the two functions have to be integrated to some level, although the integration is often ambiguous or concealed.

The role of the proprietor and his business interests is of great importance in the Nigerian mass media. Most of the private publishers have extensive business interest for which their publications would have some respect. Visible publishers like those of the Concord Group, *The Guardian* and *Champion* newspapers in Nigeria are not necessarily more involved in the daily running of their publications than less visible ones as those of the *Punch* newspapers and *Vanguard*. The "ambiguous" and "concealed" integration of news and business ultimately ends in the reduction of the mass media accountability to the populace. As is often said, advertising is more fundamental to mass media existence than daily sale (especially of newspapers). And big time advertisers are about the best business friends of the media.

It follows then that those perceived as assessors of media performance have a stake in press responsibility. It can also be stated that the two most influential in this regard are government, and the business sector, in that order.



## **Guaging Public Opinion**

In every democratic societies, the opinion of the governed is always vital in decision-taking and policy formulation. In Africa too, where there is a steady move towards the establishment of democratically elected governments, it is significant to place the views of the public high on the agenda of the rulers.

Public opinion has never referred to the opinion of every citizen of a nation nor even those eligible for voting. The term is a selective attribution of expressed views to a section of society that is concerned with the issue on which there is need to form and put forward an opinion (Owens-Ibie, 1988). "Publics" differ just as issues differ. As Hennessy (1975) has stated, there is no permanent 'public' that supports or opposes press output. Each issue creates its public. And no opinion is public opinion if it is not expressed. The theory of "latent opinion" has always had problems explaining itself in acceptable terms.

Opinions are expressed in many ways. Peaceful processions are ways of expressing opinions. Within our context in this paper, the mass media have always been avenues through which opinions are expressed. As the "conscience" of the people, the mass media are always relied on to convey the views of the people to the rulers. This is done through widespread coverage of activities of the "masses" as well as editorials reflecting an aggregation of the views of the people, issue by issue. This has always been a major responsibility of the mass media, for which they are accountable to their audiences.

## **Media Opinion and Public Opinion**

It is clear that the role of the mass media as conveyors of popular opinion is not being played properly in many developing countries. Hennessy (1975) has noted that "the mass media are vitally important to the maintenance of democracy in the modern world". No democratic society survives without the mass media.

Politicians have always believed that the mass media can read the "Public mind", and the mass media always appear to give that indication. As Cohon (1963) opines,

the policy maker reaches for the newspaper as an official source of public opinion; as the instrument of "feedback". In fact, many officials treat the press and public opinion as synonymous, either explicitly equating them or using them interchangeably.

Herein lies the conflict. The elite in society (political, economic, etc)

sees the mass media as the heartbeat of the public. They see press opinion as public opinion. But in reality, many developing societies are fast jettisoning such press systems. Thus, "public opinion... becomes the telling of the views of officials and media opinion leaders, and few, if any, other individuals or groups are part of the process" (Hennessy, 1975). In this case, "public opinion" becomes the expressed opinions of a few informed elites, often for selfish reasons. And here, the knowledge gap hypothesis comes to play. The growing knowledge of the elite and the thinning spectrum of what the 'masses' know makes the latter susceptible to any interpretation given to public issues by the elite. This view often finds publicity in the mass media, and in a few cases, passes as "public opinion".

In reality, public opinion can be hijacked at various points if debates on each prevailing issue are hijacked by dishonest and self-seeking elites, drummed into media people, consumed by opinion leaders and transmitted to the unsuspecting masses. Since most opinion leaders also rely on the mass media for information, they end up presenting a distorted version of reality to their opinion seekers who, ultimately, have no opinion of their own anymore. It becomes erroneous, therefore, to refer to elite opinion as "public opinion" because they carry little or no weight of the opinion of the "masses". Of course, there are issues that may require more elite opinion than those from the grassroots. This is where honest political education comes in, a role that the mass media ought to major in.

## **Credibility in Media Performance**

The mass media are full of praises for themselves whenever they are given opportunities for self assessment. Ray Ekpu (1990), Editor-in-Chief of *Newswatch* magazine, says:

Our concern for the public good also underlies our stress on investigative journalism. Our willingness to undertake investigation is anchored in our belief that the people's right to know must be upheld, that the government must be held accountable to those whose taxes pay for it.

On the other hand, Denton and Woodward (1985) observe that, the old belief that the press is the watchdog for public, the "neutral eyes and ears" has been reduced to a myth. The conventional norms and standards of determining newsworthiness are often put aside when personal interests overwhelm the necessity to maintain journalistic standards. And in considering the neutrality of the press, it should be noted that "objective" news presentation or analyses could be overwhelmed by biased non-verbal cues, especially in the electronic



media. Such cues may include facial expressions, voice quality, volume of voice, speed and emphasis of news items, gestures, etc (Owens-Ibie, 1990).

In effect, it is the degree to which a media organisation sides with the truth in the face of apparent sanction from powerful quarters that determines the degree of its placement of credibility on its list of achievable priorities.

## **Towards a New Democratic Order**

The mass media can and do influence political and economic decisions. What is unknown is the degree to which veiled selfish views are expressed through their channels. The acid test of the good performance of the mass media in the transition process is how much they are exposed to the sanctions of their audiences. According to Meyer (1987)

...Who will watch the watchdogs? ...If news people are sincere in their assertions that readers constitute their most important reference group, then readers should be in a good position to use their influence to effect some improvement.

But are the mass media willing to face the sanction of their audiences? Does their agenda-setting role not extend to the editing of "letters to the Editor" to present a favourable image? The broadcast media are in particular need of an effective feedback mechanism. Specific programmes should be designed to handle the views and opinions of the 'public' concerning media output; and such opinions should guide the media in subsequent performance.

## **Conclusion**

In advanced societies (notably the U.S.), the mass media are highly regarded when compared to political leaders (Robinson and Kohut, 1988). This has a basis on their ethical considerations and their assessment of responsibility to their constituencies. In developing countries, and especially in Nigeria, the mass media cannot boast of such high rating. We have examined the overt and covert causes of media failure to uphold ethical standards.

It has been observed earlier that the mass media thrive more under democratic systems. That is why there is much hope that the mass media in Africa will overcome their present limitations and struggles and evolve a new order that combines high professional standards

with an equally high regard for "what the people say", and to be a vital tool in putting the views of the 'public' in the agenda of government.

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