

## **ADVERTISING AND JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The mass media play diverse roles in society and people have come to rely on them for information, enlightenment and relaxation. The audience of the mass media are however, many and varied -scattered over time and space, and so cannot come together to take collective action. This places them at a disadvantaged position where so much influences and forces are exerted on them. One of such forces is advertising, as advertisers have long discovered the power of the media and the masses' overdependence on them to meet certain needs. While the masses seek to get information from the media on what is happening around them, how to live their lives and how to release tension, advertisers are constantly devising means of packaging persuasive messages that will effectively win the hearts of the audience, and get them to buy their ideas, products and services. This article reflects on the relationship between the media, society and the audience, and how advertisers use the media to exploit the audience, presenting their messages as useful and credible, paying the media organisations and thus making profit for their businesses at the expense of the masses.

**KEYWORDS:** Advertising, Journalism, Advertisement, Editorial, Advertorial.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The mass media serve the society in a variety of ways -they provide information for the masses and present them with pleasant and exciting experiences that help them to ease tension and forget about real life, especially the boring and unpleasant parts of it. Lasswell (1948), Wright (1960), and McQuail (2010) highlight the functions of the mass media to include correlation, cultural transmission, entertainment, mobilization, personal identity, integration, and social interaction. McQuail, Blumer and Brown (1972) also posit that individuals rely on the mass media for information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, entertainment

and education. The people who rely on these media are often the mass audience -very large in number, very widely dispersed, largely unknown, lack self-awareness and identity, receive messages anonymously, are heterogeneous and incapable of acting together in an organized way to secure an objective, but are always acted upon by different forces. One of such forces that act on the media audience is advertising. Advertisers often take advantage of the masses' overdependence on the mass media to dump their goods, services and ideas on them indiscriminately, and because most media forms and organizations depend largely on advertisers

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for revenue, they are most often willing to exploit the audience for commercial ends.

Journalists often strive to help the audience of different mass media achieve their goals by presenting them with editorials-information that would help them in their day-to-day decision making. Journalism practice generally allow strained individuals (journalists) within a given society, community, state or nation to engage in the gathering, processing and publishing of editorial materials for the overall benefit of society.

### **WHAT IS JOURNALISM?**

Many scholars view the concept of 'journalism' differently. Akinfeleye (1990) x-rays peoples' views of journalism in Nigeria and reveals that while some see it as a vocation, others see it as either a trade or simply an occupation and so he concludes that journalism is in a confused state. He attributes this confusing state of affairs to the colonial rulers who did not see journalism education as necessary. This, according to Akinfeleye, partly accounts for why for many years Nigerian universities did not offer any formal journalism training. And until recently, Nigerian journalists were being viewed as bunch of drop-outs who had been rejected by other professions. This uncomplimentary view of journalism and journalists in Nigeria in Akinfeleye's view has made the 'profession', 'trade', 'craft', or 'vocation', very unprestigious particularly during Nigeria's early nationhood.

An average Nigerian views a journalist merely as one who is privileged to work with a print or electronic medium or as one who sources for and writes or reads news for a print or electronic mass medium. Lawrence (1998) however, views a journalist as any 'professional' person who collects, prepares and edits information (news and commentaries) for publication or broadcast. He sees journalists as key players in governance.

Donsbach in Kunczik (1998) describes a journalist as someone who is involved in the shaping of mass media output through the gathering, evaluation, sighting, processing or dissemination of news, commentaries or entertainment. Nwanyin (2001) opines that a practising journalist is anyone who practises the art of news gathering, writing, editing or publishing for any media either as an employee or as a freelancer. Journalists practise what is called journalism and journalism most generally can be viewed as the activity of reporting and interpreting the news for the mass media.

Since it has become glaring that journalism takes place in the media, journalists most often work for the different media.

Apart from journalism, many other activities take place within the mass media, each of them competing for attention and importance. One of such major activities that take place within the media is advertising. Advertising is the business of making and placing advertisement -a message designed to promote the sale of ideas, goods, and services on behalf of a paid sponsor. It is an activity that generates revenue for most media organizations, and often seeks to draw the attention of consumers to something.

Advertising has been widely used to sell a variety of ideas, products and services and has proved to be a potent tool in marketing communications, as it persuades people to buy or patronize certain ideas, goods and services. Product manufacturers and distributors, service providers, advertising agencies and media operators have since realised this, and so they make efforts to reach their publics with every possible medium of communication, including the different media of mass communication. This explains why advertising seems to be the media form and content that we most often encounter in our daily lives.

We live in a society where people have so many needs and sometimes depend on the mass media for messages that can gratify their needs, and as a result, the media tend to bombard them with so many different messages pertaining to different activities that happen within the society.

Obviously, it is not possible for media audiences to grab all the messages that come from the media and so, some kinds of messages are presented in some ways in order to capture the attention of their audiences. Unlike journalism, where journalists merely seek to present the news as they are or appear to be, advertising is a more persuasive form of communication. It tries to fashion out particular ways through which its messages can effectively get to its audience and get them to act in particular ways as intended by the sponsors of the message. And while journalism always seeks to serve public interests, advertising serves individual or group interest(s). This article seeks to find out how advertising has affected the practice of journalism in Nigeria.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) highlight three needs that determine how important a given medium of mass communication can be to a person at different points in time: the need to understand one's social world -surveillance, the need to act meaningfully and effectively in that world -social utility, and the need to escape from that world when tensions are high -fantasy-escape. When these needs get high, people tend to turn to the mass media to meet these needs, and so, the media have the opportunity to affect them. The needs however change over time based on our interactions in the society.

Media Dependency Theory holds that the more a person depends on the media to meet his needs, the more important the media will be in his life, and therefore the more the effects of the media

on him. Because the media most often meet the daily needs of society and its members, they in turn rely on the media to understand the world, fit in, and move away, when necessary.

Dependency on media usually, is a product of three relationships:

- **The relationship between the society and the media:** Within this relationship, media access and availability are regarded as important antecedents to an individual's experience with the media. The nature of media dependence on societal systems varies across political, economic, and cultural systems.
- **The relationship between the media and the audience:** This relationship is the key variable in this theory because it affects how people might use a mass medium. This relationship also varies across media systems. The more salient the information needs, the stronger the motivation to seek mediated information and the dependency on the medium. Consequently, the likelihood for the media to affect audiences becomes greater.
- **The relationship between the society and the audience:** Societies influence consumers' needs and motives for media use, and provide norms, values, knowledge, and laws for their members. Social systems can function as alternatives to the media by offering similar services of the media.

Advertisers and media professionals have long realised that members of the society (the media audience) rely on the media to meet their needs, and so, they strive to package advertising messages in a manner that would be beneficial to the advertiser, the media, and members of the society. They present their messages in a more interesting manner with information that seem beneficial to the audience. They attempt to define the world, show how to live in it, and how to get out of trouble when confronted.

## **ADVERTISERS' INFLUENCE IN THE MEDIA: CONCENTRATION OF OWNERSHIP**

Ever since mass media became more advanced, companies and organizations have naturally employed these means of communication to inform a large number of people about their products and services. Without anything going wrong about that, this innovation allows concepts and ideas to be shared with others within and outside their immediate environment. Big businesses invest in the communication of messages using the mass media. This takes us back to the cultural catchphrase, 'the medium is the message' of Marshal McLuhan (1964). He explained that technology or the medium itself affects social organization and understanding, leaving behind what had been society's mainstay personal, face-to-face communication.

However, as the years have progressed, the sophistication of advertising methods and techniques have advanced, enticing, shaping and even creating consumerism and needs where hitherto there was none, or turning luxuries into necessities.

Blore (2000) notes that as corporate competition has increased so too has the need for return for massive expenditures on advertising. Industries now spend millions or even billions of dollars to win the hearts and minds of their potential consumers and to influence their choices towards purchasing their products and services.

Media agencies and companies, especially the private-owned depend heavily on advertising in order to remain afloat in the broadcast business. Given this dependency, advertisers often exert undue influences -knowingly or tacitly. In most cases, if something is reported that the advertiser does not 'like' or the media company has funded a documentary that exposes bad practice by an advertiser, the media company stands to lose much needed revenue that can keep him in business. Thus, the mainstream media is largely

driven by the forces of the market. The discovery of the commodity aspect of news has sparked an inflow of big capital into the media. In major press enterprises, the idealistic journalists -those gentle dreamers in pursuit of truth who once ran our newspapers, are now replaced by businessmen but the blame for all these does not rest on the reporters. They are the victims of the arrogance of their bosses and the media groups. According to Chomsky:

Since its transformation into a commodity, news has ceased to be submitted to the traditional criteria of checking for authenticity or mistakes. It is now governed by the laws of the market. This is the most significant of all the developments that have affected the domain of culture. As a consequence, the former heroes of journalism have been replaced by mass media workers who are more or less anonymous (Chomsky, 1997, p. 168).

Power corporations are fast becoming major influences on mainstream media. In some cases major multinational corporations own media stations and outlets. Even as numbers of media outlets increase, the ownership is becoming even more concentrated as mega mergers take hold. At the same time, vertical integration gives the big players even more avenues to cross-sell and cross-market their products for even more amazing profits. As a result, dumping down of content is not uncommon, while increasing the political and economic powers of corporations and advertisers. This supports the assertion of Rosenwein (1999) that having a few huge corporations control over outlets of expression could lead to less aggressive news coverage and a more muted marketplace of ideas. But Caplan (1997) suggests that it is useful to remind ourselves that free expression is threatened not just blatantly by authoritarian governments and all those in the private sector who fear public exposure, but also more subtly by the handful of global media conglomerates that have reduced

meaningful diversity of expression in much of the globe.

In the light of the above, one may be forced to ask: How does all of this affect concrete media coverage? The answer is not far-fetched-if the media moguls control media content and distribution, then they have a lock on the extent and range of diverse views and information. Most citizens get their views and understanding of the world and issues around them through the mainstream media. It is therefore critical to understand some of these underlying issues.

We should recognize that many people sit down in front of their television sets because they want to see exactly what is on offer. Therefore, while it could be argued that there is nothing wrong with media companies advertising, let it also be known that it would be good for more people to be aware of what is happening around them brought through the mass media in the manner and form devoid of any influence, both internal and external.

Media practitioners should work in conditions of self-denial and work with enthusiasm and a spirit of sacrifice. They should shun easy answers and a life of comfort, even to the extent of putting their personal safety at risk. This should be done with the sole aim of bearing witness to the state of the world in which we live and the multitude of dangers and hopes that it contains.

## **A REFLECTIVE EVALUATION OF ADVERTISING AND JOURNALISM PRACTICES**

Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) posit that the environments around us -political, economic, social or ethical are constructed and maintained through a variety of communication practices and media. Advertisements and editorials constitute a major form of communication practices and their media range from newspapers to magazines, radio, television, posters, handbills, billboards,

etc. Advertisements and editorials allow the media to transport ideas, feelings and emotions from one person or groups of persons to the other and these acts of communication constitute society itself. Advertisements and editorials have created great communities where people have exchanged information at different times and on different occasions. Our relationship between one another or within different elements in the society have to a large extent been built and reinforced by advertising and journalism, hence these two communication practices have contributed significantly to our knowledge of society and our interactions with things within the society.

Advertisement is a message that an advertiser (usually an individual or a group of persons) wants to pass across to the audience, regardless of whether it is useful, informative or relevant to them while editorials are useful information that are relevant to the audience; not necessarily what an individual or group of persons want to say. What this means is that advertisement is usually a media content that an individual or group of person have to put across to the audience, often paying for placement while editorials offer content that that people seek and are ready to pull to themselves.

Hitherto, editorials almost always meant content generated by journalists, who were assisted by other people in the media organisations. It was unheard of that an individual or group of persons who were not journalists could create editorials or that a journalist had to develop advertisement for a company but times have changed. It is now possible for companies to generate contents that are not dissimilar to what editorials offer and to make the audience clamour for them.

Non-journalists have come to generate or pay journalists to generate quasi-editorial contents in the form of advertorials, blogs on the internet, public service announcements, etc. Some advertisers have even established media houses

and employed journalists to serve the interest of their businesses. They do these because they realise the difference between journalism and advertising. When they let go of advertising and actually attempt to focus on editorial content, the audience appreciate their gesture and the good editorial content they put forward builds goodwill for them much more than advertisements that masquerade as pseudo-editorials.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADVERTISEMENTS AND EDITORIALS IN THE MEDIA**

Turow (2009) views mass media as technological instruments through which mass communication takes place and mass media outfits (organisations) as companies that send messages via mass media. In Turow's view, media organisations usually go into business to make money from the materials that they produce and distribute with the aid of the different mass media that are available to them. Because of this focus of money-making, they view all their programmes and contents as capable of generating income starting from news, information, entertainment, education to advertisements.

The media in Nigeria are not in any way different. Most media outfits are being owned by key players in different sectors of the economy and journalists appear to be tools in their hands to achieve their personal and or collective desires. Of course, employers pay their employee's salary. In return, they expect to say how they will do their jobs. In Cross River Broadcasting Corporation (CRBC), a government-owned radio and television station in Calabar-Nigeria, under the leadership of the former governor Liyel Imoke, the station was given a target to generate a certain amount of money monthly, and to remit a certain percentage to the government coffers. This created ethical problems for the journalists,

as they were expected to collect money for news reports. Such journalists could not report critically on issues that have to do with governance in Cross River State.

Governments, through their commissioners and special advisers often put pressure on public service journalists to report things which are favourable to the government (even when they are not newsworthy) and not to report things which are unfavourable to the government (even if they are news worthy). They tend to enforce public service discipline, to make journalists do as the government wants. This is especially difficult to resist in a country such as Nigeria, where there is little or no alternative employment.

It is however, not only in government-owned media that such pressures exist. Even though commercial media are often paid for by a mixture of advertising and sales, to increase sales, newspapers, radio and television stations sometimes sponsor sporting or cultural events, and then publicise them. Media managers may demand more coverage for an event than it is worth in order to promote the event as much as possible. One needs to remind them of the danger of this, that other events will have to be neglected to give extra coverage to the sponsored event, and that this will risk losing readers, listeners or viewers.

Advertisers also bring pressure to bear upon publishers and editors. A big advertiser may threaten to stop advertising unless a media organisation runs a news report of something good which the advertiser has just done; or, much worse, he may threaten to stop advertising unless they ignore a news event which is unfavourable to the advertiser. In 2015 for instance National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) in Nigeria alerted the public on the presence of contaminated Nestle Maggi Noodles in the Nigerian market but apart from online sources, most traditional media outlets in Nigeria were

silent or at least tried to defend Nestle. This could only be attributed to the kind of patronage these media houses enjoyed from Nestle and as such could not afford to spoil Nestles' image.

In some cases, the advertiser may even be the government. In many countries the government is the biggest advertiser-with job advertisements, calls for tenders, public announcements and so on-and this can be a way in which governments bring indirect pressure to bear upon commercial news media. CRBC for instance, relies on Cross River State Government for advertisements on the Calabar Christmas Festival, and other tourist and intervention programmes. Can any of her journalists do a report against the government? Certainly not.

What can one do in this kind of situation? The first thing any journalist should do is to consult the editor. It will be left for the editor to decide what to do. He or she will need to resist the employer as far as possible, pointing out the dangers of failing to report the news truly and fairly. The main danger is that readers or listeners, who already know of the event which is being suppressed may lose confidence in the newspaper, radio or television station involved. This may, in the long run, result in more serious problems for ministers than some short-term embarrassment, and may do more long-term damage to the organisation's finances than the loss of one advertiser.

The truth though is that ones' power to resist pressure from his employer is limited. One can only do his best, and accept that the rest is beyond his control.

Most private media in Nigeria do not even depend on advertising for revenue but rather, their owners are ready to sponsor them in order to create goodwill for their other businesses or activities. Most state governors (past and present), senators, ministers, other politicians and top functionaries, business moguls, etc. in

Nigeria own and sponsor different media organisations, using them to create favourable images for themselves. They believe that by controlling the media, they control the economy of the regions that their media cover. Very few media organisations are owned by journalists and this explains why professionalism in journalism is most often not upheld in most media organisations. The journalist is just a mere servant that has been provided with certain ingredients with which he/she must use in cooking the news and other media content to the satisfaction of the audience.

## **ADVERTISING AND EDITORIAL CONVERGENCE**

The borders between journalism, advertising and PR are becoming increasingly blurred, as hidden advertisements, advertorials, infomercials and opinion articles are commonly found in the media. A study conducted by Pew Research Center showed that the category of sponsored advertisements in general and advertorials in particular, are undergoing a considerable increase, coming third on the list of the six main trends of journalism for 2012 (Axhami, Mersini, and Zela, 2015).

Why are advertisements getting more successful in the form of editorials? Advertisement in the form of editorial (advertorial), most times, appears like a common newspaper article and, as a result, the information presented draws greater attention and is better memorized than the other commercial messages (Cameron and Curtin, 1995). Moreover, the advertorial is perceived by readers as more reliable than an ordinary advertisement (Axhami et al, 2015).

According to Axhami et al, researchers have varying attitudes to the impact and importance of advertorials for the reader-consumer and the quality of journalism. Cameron and Curtin consider the weakening of borders between the editorial and commercial content as pollution of

information. Critics of 'advertorials' argue that advertorials have negative effects on the objectivity of the media; that advertorials deceive readers and bring about unethical promotion of individuals, organisations and politicians in particular, as they are used to portray negative image of opponents, and that they make the media appear clearly business oriented.

Bush (2015) however, argues that the advertorial is a win-win-win situation as it offers unique advantages to the consumer, the advertiser, and the media organisation, as consumers regard advertorials as 'news you can use', since they provide useful information for decision making and are typically more interesting than advertisements. For the advertiser, the advertorial is a powerful tool, as it gives business the chance to introduce itself and is more memorable to consumers due to its narrative format. For the consumer, advertorials are more reliable than conventional advertisements; for the media organisation, the advertorial is profitable, as the advertiser is definitely paying for it.

For the advertorial to exert considerable influence on the media and the consumer, it must be of very high quality, i.e. it should be created by professionals. The more powerful and professional the advertorial, the greater its influence on the consumers. This influence is harder to understand by an ordinary reader, listener or viewer than experts in the field of media and communication.

For the purpose of editorial freedom and independence, there should be a clear distinction between editorials and advertisements in the media, even though both play very important roles in the development of media and society. It is important to ensure that the reader can distinguish paid content from editorial content in a medium. This not only satisfies legal requirements, but also protects the credibility of

the medium. Simply noting "Paid Advertisement" in small type above the article or the edge of the screen is sufficient. In the experience of Busch (n.d.) doing this has no effect on the effectiveness of paid advertorials.

## **CONCLUSION**

Advertising has greatly influenced the practice of journalism in Nigeria. Most independent media organisations in Nigeria depend on advertising for survival. They generate a greater part of their income from advertising and advertisers in turn bring pressure to bear on their owners and editors. Big advertisers sometimes dictate what the media should or should not report and can threaten to withdraw their patronage from such organisations, should they refuse to yield to their dictates.

Ideally, any news organisation should dismiss such threats, and judge each story only on its newsworthiness. However, this is easier in a developed economy than it is in a country like Nigeria, where an average commercial news organisation operates on a tiny profit margin, it is not often easy to turn away a big advertiser, and its owners may feel forced to give in to pressures.

In spite of all these, principled media organisations are still surviving in the business without bowing to undue pressure from these advertisers.

For as much as the media organisations need the advertisers, the advertisers also need the media. Any media organisation that is capable of winning the hearts of its audience through objective, fair and balanced reportage would definitely win the hearts of advertisers who are constantly in search of media to reach those kinds of audiences. Channels Television and The Punch Newspaper are two, out of many news organisations in Nigeria that have at the moment been able to maintain journalistic integrity while retaining the patronage of advertisers.



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