

RIGIDITY OF NEWS ROUTINES AND SOCIAL MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN NIGERIA: A RE-IMAGINATION

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Abstract

The search for the best model for journalism practice has inspired debates right from the ancient European era through to the era of the Penny Press in the formative years of the United States to the present. This paper is designed to explore what journalists understand by news routine as well as to explore the link between such understanding and journalists' identification, description, expansion and dissemination of social meaning in Nigeria. In conformity with the notion that the representativeness of a sample to the general population is of no significance in qualitative research, a theoretical sample of three Nigerian newspaper texts were interpreted in accordance with analytic procedures prescribed in Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis. When Focus Group data were triangulated with the representation made with the newspaper texts, the finding was that Nigerian journalists legitimize the arbitrary by embracing rigid ideologically-tainted news routines. Conclusion is that such legitimization constitutes impediment to Nigeria's development by undermining journalists' capacity for capacious construction and dissemination of social meaning.

Keywords: Nigerian journalists, development journalism, social meaning, discourse

Introduction

A nuanced dissection of the impact of journalism on the socio-political and economic development of Nigeria needs to be done in the light of debates about the role of journalism in different times and cultural contexts. Right from November 18, 1892 when Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels rejected editorship position of a party newspaper on the ground that the position was "barren" and "inhibitive of freedom of discussion" (Gouldner, 1976, p. 100), debate has raged on. In the 1920s when John Dewey and Walter Lippmann debated, Lippmann had argued that the "world was so

complicated that people needed to have it interpreted for them by cadre of experts who were specially trained to understand it” (Anderson & Ross, 2002, p.291). Dewey’s riposte was that the basic problem of democracy was not about information and its interpretation but how to “get ordinary citizens to engage in civic conversations” to determine their own fate (Anderson & Ross, 2002, p. 291). This debate has tapped into the belief that journalists are ideologues who must commit themselves to the logic of idea as vested in words. In the belief that journalists are ideologues is the assumption that they should use the power of words to present a map of how society is working, failing and how it could be transformed (Gouldner, 1976, pp. 28-30). On the premise that the world might change through the rational appeal ideas wield on consciousness, journalists are urged to define themselves as foci of power with moral responsibility to change their community in ways defined as rational (Gouldner, 1976, p. 57).

There are stake holders who also believe that what democracy needs in the twenty first century is diversity in sources of information. To such stake holders, the emergence of the internet and the social media it inspired are things of joy. Happier with the wiki phenomenon which allows anyone to participate in the production and dissemination of information without the interference and restriction of experts, the admirers of diversity of information source celebrate the wiki phenomenon for providing the freedom to say and “disseminate anything subject to correction and editing by any other anonymous contributor at any time” (Sunstein, 2006, as cited in Webster, 2011, pp. 37-38). Condorcet Jury’s theorem which posits that the average decisions of “members of a group are more accurate than average decision made by a small group of deliberating experts” is usually cited by supporters of diversity of information source to buttress their position (Webster, 2011, p. 38). Contrarily, reasons that rubbish the wiki phenomenon as “information chaos” have been adduced (Webster, 2011, p. 32). Key among such reasons is the belief that profusion of information source creates a situation where cultural members are compelled to unconsciously activate filtering mechanism to enable them cope with the avalanche of babble that the wiki phenomenon encourages. The concern is that filtering stimulates unwitting relegation and even rejection of nuanced insights (Webster, 2011). A more dreaded impact of the internet is the view that instead of using it to “seek news, information or culture” people use it to “actually be the news, information and culture” (Keen, 2008, p.7 as cited in Webster, 2011, p.36). This dread has compelled critics to wonder thus: “when we all become authors, whom can we trust” (Keen, 2008, p.65).

Theoretical Framework

In the light of the belief that “a single remarkable individual may see things correctly while all the world about him has wrong view” (Habermas, 2001, p. 276), the underlying assumption in this paper premises the notion that however capacious the opportunity for the populace to have their voices heard, there still remains the vital issue of “bringing these voices together in ways that allow decisions to be made in the common interest on the basis of the best possible information availability” (Webster, 2011, p. 38). This assumption privileges the belief that the only arena that might optimize the bringing together of contending voices is the arena of the orthodox media. There has been a spurt in theoretical articulations detailing how the orthodox media could succeed in refining cacophony of voices into the rationality that would prevent politicians from being in politics “just for themselves alone” (Webster, 2011, p. 35). From Meyrowitz’s (1985) Theory of Mediated Place to Rosen’s (1999) public journalism project, there is no dearth of theoretical postulations regarding what journalists ought to do to enable them engender democracy-vitalizing information. While Meyrowitz (1985) theorizes that journalists should see media organizations more as arena where communication takes place than places where communication is transmitted, Gouldner’s (1976) takes the view that journalists should “mine and champion reciprocity of perspectives” (pp. 46, 47 & 158). To mine and champion perspectives is to vest journalists with the task of ensuring that the perspectives of ordinary cultural members are brought to bear on, and to influence the perspectives, whims, idiosyncrasies, facts and figures that shape how the powerful articulates, implements and assesses government policies and projects. Gouldner reminds journalists that the structure of their social meaning production will be liberated only when journalists establish and run independent watchdog agency with powers to exact censure when social meaning production are considered inconsistent with journalists’ principles of collaboration and reciprocity.

The Odds against Nigerian Journalists

Across the world, journalists hardly measure up to the ideal occupational standards reviewed in preceding paragraphs. In Nigeria, many factors account for journalists’ inability to practice journalism in line with the theorized models. To a significant measure, Nigeria is a one product economy – oil. The central government controls the oil industry. Both state and local governments survive on handouts from the central government. Media organizations that employ majority of the journalists are either owned by the central government or the state governments. The remaining tiny fraction is owned by cronies of present or past government officials. The condition of service for journalists is austere and streamlined in ways that

constantly remind journalists of the dire consequences of reportorial activism. In Nigeria, journalists are not directly compelled to comply with a pre-defined meaning of reality. Discourses of content production are the subtle resource that is exploited to confine journalists within the comfort zone of the powerful. Discourse as used in this context should be understood as a meaningful social process as conceptualized by Fiske (1983) as cited in Birch (1989, p. 15).

Among the discourses of media production that are exploited to whip journalists into line is the blinker of making them mistake the benefits of an occupational union for the benefits that a profession status confers. The benefits of professional status include regulated entry into the profession and the establishment of a professional watchdog agency vested with the responsibility of instilling discipline and exacting sanction on matters of reward and misdemeanor (Kunczik, 1995, p. 22). The misrecognition of the instrumental for the developmental role of the media also hoodwinks Nigerian journalists into the malaise of functioning, without knowing, as mere propaganda machinery of the powerful. Stakeholders in development communication like Nora Quebral, modernization theorists like Lucian Pye (Kunczik, 1995, pp.85, 86 & 205) and Schudson (2008) believe that any model of journalism that spews praises for perceived achievements of whoever is in power is never a good model of development journalism. The unfortunate fact that media contents in Nigeria are potpourri of adulations about the idiosyncrasies of whoever is in power is underscored by the claim that “nothing tells the story of the fall of Nigeria more eloquently than the capitulation that journalism suffered during the era of Peoples Democratic Party in Nigeria” (Olumhense, 20015, p. 53). Wood (1970, p. 47) had explained the concept of “trained incapacity” in order to highlight that rather than develop, adulatory journalism actually retards development. Wood’s point is that most bureaucracies are concerned less with final impact of their policy than with its articulation. Based on this point, Wood advocates that instead of praising, the media should raise counter intuitive measures to check parochialism amongst bureaucrats. Kunczik (1995, p. 211) on the other hand notes that:

Journalists must point to possible unforeseen consequences of planned measures because the rule of the thumb accepted as valid is that the unforeseen consequences of planned actions are usually greater in complex social systems than planned consequences.

Another discourse used by the powerful to control journalists is a compromised research method. Journalists are compromised by research method instruction during university training. During such training,

journalism students are denied the knowledge of qualitative research method with its potential to impart into the consciousness of the students the awareness that could enable them resist being puppets in the hands of the powerful (Amadi, 2011). Aware that qualitative research method could infuse into journalism students the consciousness that would enable them question “inimical phenomenal forms” (Meyers, 2009, p. 42), the powerful exploit the relationship between “epistemology and politics” (Hardt, 2004, p. 105) to secure the marginalization of critical qualitative research method. The marginalization is accomplished with the specious belief that since the media always disseminate what the audience likes, that media researchers should concentrate only on how the audience enjoys the contents. This flawed belief disparages questions that demand what disseminated messages mean and the intrigues that shape how messages are composed (Hardt, 2004, pp. 103f, McQuail, 1991, p.14f).

The Problem

In the light of the complexity of challenges a Nigerian journalist faces, this paper explored a convenient sample of Nigerian journalists to see whether they would identify the flaws found in a convenient sample of texts selected from Nigerian newspapers. The convenient sample is made up of journalists. The journalists were watched to ascertain what they would give as the reason the authors of the sampled texts failed to avoid the flaws identified in the sampled texts.

Research Design

Three texts were conveniently sampled from three Nigerian newspapers – *Vanguard*, *The Nation* and *Dailysun*. The texts were sampled based on inherent ideological flaws found in them. The texts were given to a focus group. The idea was to explore whether the focus group would be able to identify the ideological flaws that have been identified in the text. The group was, in line with how activities in a focus group proceed (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p.4), encouraged to read and discuss the sample texts. During their interaction, the group was encouraged to ask one another questions, note each other’s perspectives and turn in their interaction in writing.

Rationale for the Design

Qualitative research design has evolved and is now anchored on the principle of what works. This principle dictates that in designing a qualitative study, a researcher should build in “vast middle spaces that embody infinite possibilities for blending artistic, expository and social scientific ways of analysis and representation” (Ellingson, 2013, p 414). To be noted also is the

fact that new re-imaginings in qualitative research frown against prescribing a tailor-made research design format. Leading voices in the articulation of this new thinking insist that researchers should disregard conventionalized pre-given structures when they design a study. In the place of the pre-givens, researchers are asked to be “provocative, risky, stunning, astounding and to challenge foundational assumptions in ways that should transform the world” (St. Pierre, 2013, p.473). Also leveraged in the design is the fact that qualitative studies focus only on social practices and meanings in a specific historical or cultural context (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 122).

Rationale for the Sample and Data

To be noted is the fact that sampling in qualitative research is often done purposively – meaning that research subjects are selected for their *typicality* as the best exemplar that represents or reflects all the attributes of the other samples that were left out (Maxwell, 1996, pp. 71 & 79; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 181, Condit, 1991, p. 368; Van Dijk, 2006, p. 99; Meyer, 2006, p. 18; Silverman, 2006, p. 308; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 122). Put another way, sampling in qualitative research is determined by the objectives of the study. When the objective and/or the problem of a study has been made clear, a sampling procedure is chosen to ensure that a “wide range of qualities, attributes, situations and incidents” germane to the “boundaries of the phenomenon under study” are “tapped” to generate data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 123). It warrants being stated that what constitutes data in qualitative research ranges from “talk, gestures and sentences” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 4 & 18) to “anything that the researcher could observe or capture – be it a one-word quotation or a lengthy story-like quotation” (Keyton, 2001, p. 70). What matters when using these things as data is the “meaning the researcher can use them to construct” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 4 & 18). Also important is the fact that qualitative studies do not strive for data that are subjected to statistical procedures (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.122).

Rationale for Data Representation

In representing data, a qualitative researcher does not set out to reveal “objective scientific truths” but to “construct interpretations of certain ways of understanding the world in historical moments” and in ways that are “subjective and relative” (Ang, 2001, p. 186). Okeke & Ume (2004, p.326) note that the use of words in place of numbers highlights the fact that “qualitative research implies emphasis on processes and meanings that are not measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency.” A point to be noted is that qualitative data analysis is custom-built and “choreographed” according to the task in hand; thus the pass word is “learn by

doing” (Creswell, 2007, p.150). On practical terms, data analysis in qualitative research prizes “researcher construction” and “subjective valuing” (Keyton, 2001, p. 70). Researcher construction and subjective valuing emphasize the use of subjective introspection in writing up what the researcher gleans from data. In using subjective insight, the researcher proceeds by “attributing a class of phenomenon to segments of the texts/data (Fielding & Lee, 1998, p. 41). This deconstruction approach premises the notion that “subjectivity is advantageous and can be seen as virtuous and as the basis of a researcher making distinctive contribution that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (Peshkin as cited in Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013, p. 1). Peshkin’s view resonates where Roulston (2010, p. 120) notes that “research is an explanation of subjectivities – those of the researcher and researched.” The research report should, according to Roulston, be a synthesis of the experiences of the researcher and the researched. The synthesis, Roulston notes, makes the research report a biography of the experiences of both – not an autobiography of only the experiences and subjectivity of the researcher (p. 120).

Data display

(1) Let us get it clear, there is nobody who has got into any position who has not been helped by one person or more.

Source:(SimonEbegebulem, page 5, *Vanguard* 18 July, 2015).

(2) Former President, OlusegunObasanjo yesterday defended his choice of the late UmaruYar’Adua as his successor in 1997. If I give the job to the corrupt, will I be able to defend myself before God and man?

Source:(Shola O’Neil on page 6, *The Nation* 16 July, 2015).

(3) You don’t provide for election in a state budget, but of course, there’s no state governor that is running an election that doesn’t spend from the state purse.

Source:(AkeepAlarape on page 49 of *Dailysun*, 17 July, 2015).

Data Representation

In exemplars 1 and 2, journalists Simon Ebegebulem and Shola O’Neil reported indifferently, without imputation, former President Obsanjo’s rationalization of his imposition of former Presidents Jonathan and Yar’Aduaas Presidents on Nigerians. In exemplar 3, journalist AkeepAlarape reports in the same style adopted by Simon and O’Neil. Ken Agbim, a member of Imo State House of Assembly in that exemplar spoke about a maleficence which, in decent societies, should attract sanction against a governor. The flaw in exemplars 1 and 2 is the failure of their authors to

counter-frame Obasanjo by highlighting the hidden meaning in Obasanjo's pronouncement. The hidden meaning the authors failed to highlight is Obasanjo's implicit acknowledgement that he denied Nigerians their right to choose their president. The flaw in exemplar 3 is that the journalist failed to frame that exemplar in a style that ought to portray the Imo State House of Assembly member's pronouncement as indifferent to abuse of power by a governor.

What the three journalists needed to do was to "challenge, assert and contradict the news makers" in those circumstances where the news makers had expected the indifferent style used by the journalists (Fairclough, 2001, p. 194). If they had challenged the news makers, they would have upheld the injunction that "every citizen's obligation is to comprehend as accurately as possibly what someone meant when he or she said something publicly" (Silas & Gronbeck, 2001, p. 4). The point is that the three journalists surrendered to a naturalized view of news routine because they failed to leverage the notions espoused by Fairclough, Silas & Gronbeck. When a journalist surrenders to a naturalized view of news routine, such disposition gets inscribed in the journalist's subliminal domain in a manner that goads him or her, without resistance, into the idiosyncratic dictates of the powerful (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 27 – 33). The point is that the three journalists docilely submitted to naturalize routine because of their ignorance of the forces that shape the perception and reality of the powerful. The first thing the journalists couldn't reckon with is that the activities (discourse) from which news makers make news are part of a global social system characterized by a tendency in which the maximization of the profit and power of the ruling class depends upon the maximization of its exploitation of the subordinated (Fairclough, 2001, pp. 28 – 29). Another dynamic that might have deceived the journalists to frame those indifferent exemplars as displayed was ignorance of the fact that discourses and experiences of the dominant class are shaped by their elevated social position which makes it impossible for them to understand how oppressive their discourses, actions and inactions are to the subordinated (Grossberg, 1991, pp. 134, 138 & 139, Newcomb, 1991, p. 74,).

To explore whether other journalists would detect the flaws and give reasons why the authors were deceived to frame the exemplars as displayed, I exposed the exemplars to a focus group (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4) made up of ten journalists. I encouraged them to talk to one another, ask one another point of view questions and write down one another's views regarding what the authors of exemplars 1 – 3 did and didn't do but more importantly to state how they would have handled the news makers if they were the journalists that framed the displayed texts. Upon retrieving the reactions of the focus group I found that four members of the group were able

to articulate the absurdity constituted by Obasanjo's usurpation of the right of Nigerians to choose their president. They were also able to mention that the House of Assembly man's pronouncement implies that there was nothing wrong in a state governor funding a private political campaign with public funds. What was critically shocking was the unanimous failure by the focus group to articulate why the three journalists who authored the three analyzed texts indifferently framed the exemplars as displayed. What the focus group's failure implies is that Nigerian journalists are in need of the insight that will enable them understand the selfishness that shape the perception of the powerful.

Conclusion

The failure of the focus group to articulate why the authors of the three texts could not prevent the identified flaws in the exemplars provided a premise to hypothesize that social meaning construction in Nigeria will remain rigid till majority of journalists become conscious of the deceptions that are inherent in conventional news routines.

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