A Look at the Major Challenges Facing the Newspaper Today (The Nigerian Newspaper)

Edmund Chukwuma Onwuliri
Edmund Chukwuma Onwuliri
Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja
FCT, Nigeria

Abstract: Just like any other industry in Nigeria, the Newspaper sector is grappling with its peculiar challenges that require urgent attention. This paper identifies some of the major problems such as inadequate funding, unethical conduct on the part of practitioners, issues of overbearing media owners, harsh economic conditions as well as the challenge posed by the new media that is mainly internet driven among others. A brief evolution of the newspaper as an arm of the mass media in Nigeria is attempted, thereby pointing to the possible reasons why the current challenges do exist. This effort is to draw attention to the enormous difficulties the newspaper sector in Nigeria has to deal with. Despite the enormity of the problems, the newspaper remains the pioneer and front runner in championing the cause of the ordinary man in the sacred duty of the media as the fourth estate of the realm.

Keywords: Newspaper, Major Problems, Challenge & New Media.

1. Introduction
An examination of the significant challenges facing the newspaper industry in Nigeria should begin with an analysis of the evolution of the business and practice of newspaper, both as a profession and a business. The newspaper preceded all other arms of the mass media when their development is considered. The invention of the movable type revolutionised printing and set the stage for the emergence of the print media following Johann Gutenberg’s introduction of the moveable type about 1440 in Germany, (Mbachu 2003). With the commercialisation of printing, a mass communication revolution began which catalysed the publication of newspapers and subsequently magazines. It is pertinent to note that from this point, in the evolution of the mass media, technology has played a very significant role.

In Nigeria, the evolution of the mass media also traces its origins to the establishment of the first newspaper in Abeokuta, South West Nigeria, in 1859. Iwe Irohin was a vernacular newspaper established by the Reverend Henry Townsend which used the printing technology of that time (the moveable type) to produce the first newspaper in Nigeria. Mbachu, (2003). Iwe Irohin was a weekly publication which captured both religious and political happenings of the time. According to Okafor (2014 p.37).
“This was followed by newspapers like the Anglo African, Lagos Times, Gold Coast Colony Advertiser, Observer and Lagos Weekly Record etc. established by educated Africans like Robert Campbell, Richard Beale Blaize, John Payne Jackson etc.”

Iwe Irohin and the publications that came after it marked the first phase of the development of the newspaper as an arm of the mass media in Nigeria. It is essential to state that the type of technology available to the pioneers of the newspaper business in Nigeria then made it very difficult if not impossible, to have any daily publication. The moveable type technology required heavy labour and was quite slow in churning out the finished printed materials as would be needed for a daily paper (Mbachu 2003). He further submits that it was not until 1925 that Victor Bababoni’s efforts gave Nigeria its first newspaper with pictures.

Dimkpa (1997) posits that the second set of newspapers and their owners are traceable to some foreigners, mainly Sierra Leoneans and Liberians who migrated to Nigeria during the colonial era. He further asserts that Nigerians claimed a stake in the newspaper business when the likes of Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo began the publication of the first set of indigenous newspapers like the West African Pilot and the Nigerian Tribune. Therefore, the first turning point in the print media experience of Nigeria came in 1925 when Victor Bababoni set up the Lagos Daily News using the power press technology in printing.

This development triggered the establishment of modern newspapers in the country and marked the second turning point in the Nigerian print media evolution with the acquisition in 1959 of a Forster Rotary Press from Mirror Newspapers of London by the Daily Times group. This development Mbachu, (2003) states, replaced the manual hand-fed system of printing with almost an automated method. Notably, the New Nigerian had commenced the simultaneous printing of its newspaper from two different locations in Kaduna and Lagos, thereby eliminating the burden of having two slightly different editions of one publication in one day.

From its evolutionary stages to date, the newspaper in Nigeria has come a long way. Publications have grown in numbers. A 2012 research puts the total number of daily newspapers at about 30 while the weekly stood at about 15 and while the soft sells were believed to be about 50, (Kawonise, 2012). Also, newspapers have transformed in style, focus and content. Whereas, at the beginning most of the indigenous papers were focused on the attainment of independence and subsequently on the promotion of political and regional interests, newspapers today pursue varied interests in line with the vision of the owners. However, just like any other facet of human endeavour, the press in Nigeria has had its fair share of problems and challenges.

2. Major Problems

The significant problems of the newspaper in Nigeria will be examined under the following headings:

- Media Ownership and Control
- Funding
- Unethical Practices
- Staffing/Personnel
- Infrastructural Challenges
- Technology and
- Challenge of the New/ Social Media
- Poor Working Conditions

3. Ownership and Control

In Nigeria, media ownership can be classified under two broad categories, which merely are the public/ government owned and the private. Critics and scholars have often argued that media ownership, to a considerable extent, determines the output of any media organisation. “He who pays the piper dictates the tune” has become a cliché in the media according to Ali, (2015 p.1), “Ownership has continued to play an influential role in the editorial policies of media organizations. It is as sad in some media organizations that the ethics of journalism are exchanged with the opinions and decisions of the proprietors of the organization”. McQuail (2010) as cited in Ali (2015) supports this position by
saying that “there is no doubt that owners in market-based media have ultimate power over content and can ask for what they want to be included or left”.

Some critics argue that such “meddlesomeness” is rampant in the government/public media organisations. The former Editor-In-Chief of Newswatch magazine, Dan Agbese, underscores this while referring to the position of a former military governor on media ownership: “Brigadier-General Samuel Ogbemudia, former military governor of the old Mid-West Region, once put it quite nicely when he said no government sets up a newspaper to criticise itself” (Agbese 2010, p.4). Agbese goes on to argue that even the privately owned media organisations may not be any better in the sense that despite the lofty mission statements media proprietors come up with at inception, they all have vested personal, economic, religious and even ethnic interests in setting up newspapers, radio or television stations in Nigeria. Therefore, they expect their employees to protect those interests in the discharge of their duties adequately.

Under the above scenario, the ethical standard of editorial independence, unbiased and factual presentation of events which are some of the cardinal pillars of journalism become victims of the application of ownership and control principle in not just the newspaper sector but the entire mass media space. In Nigeria today, there are hardly any government-owned newspapers that enjoy nationwide circulation. To that extent, the newspaper industry is primarily dominated by private ownership. However, all the owners have one vested interest or the other and to that extent, may never allow the operators the free hand to run the newspapers as professionally and ethically as they should. It is, therefore, a severe problem for the industry in Nigeria. Discerning minds if not much of the reading public, are aware of this problem and that has further eroded the trust and confidence they should have for newspapers in the land.

3. Funding

Funding the operations of a media organisation like a newspaper is critical to its overall satisfactory performance, sustainability and ultimate survival. The rate at which newspapers fold up in Nigeria is mostly attributed to issues of inadequate funding. Against the backdrop of poor circulation and sales with the general economic downturn, newspapers in Nigeria may be in for a hard time. Omoniyi (2010) decries the dwindling fortunes of papers when he compares the circulation figures of a Nigerian newspaper in the 1980s which he put at 500,000 daily. However, this figure attributed to one single publication can hardly be attained by the best 3 in the land in one day currently. He described the situation as one that gives the proprietors of newspapers much concern. Even though daily sales do not constitute the only source of income for publications, it sure must be a thing of great interest when the original product of a business is not enjoying expected patronage. There is no doubt that the situation could lead to some negative measures that may affect the conduct/practice of the journalist. It is also a potential danger that may drive the newspapers out of business.

It has often been said that Nigeria is an investor's paradise; however, it does appear that little or no foreign investment exists at the moment in the Nigerian newspaper space. Nigerian newspaper proprietors are known to have invested in other countries. This development, in itself, is a clear signal that all may not be well with the newspaper industry in Nigeria.

4. Unethical Practices

More than anything else, unscrupulous practices by newspapers ranging from Suppression of Truth, “Sensationalization”, “Brown Envelop Syndrome”, “Cash and Carry News” etc. have pitched the newspaper in Nigeria against the reading public. It is equally canvassed among observers that the Nigerian newspaper space is filled with “fake” reporters who do nothing but solicit “brown envelopes” from people at event venues thereby further dragging the reputation of the journalistic profession in the mud. The newspaper in Nigeria needs to rise above this problem by ensuring the strict adherence to the code of professional ethics every journalist must uphold.

5. Staffing/ Personnel

Journalism is a profession and a noble one at that. When Edmund Burke proposed the concept of the fourth arm of government being the media, it set the press apart for a critical role in society
which must be carried out by persons suitably qualified to do so. Even though there is a prescribed minimum entry level qualification, proprietors recruit less skilled personnel to work in the newsroom and other departments in newspaper houses. This situation leads to a lack of professionalism and of course, low productivity. It also maintains a strong connection with the poor public perception of the business of newspaper or journalism in Nigeria.

6. Economic/ Infrastructural Challenges

The cost of running business in Nigeria is still high. In the face of an unreliable public power supply, newspapers just like other businesses have the extra responsibility of generating their power for effective and efficient operations. This trend in itself puts additional pressure on the organisations and increase their production cost even in the face of low sales and poor reading culture, which has been identified as a factor affecting the patronage of newspapers. This unfavourable business climate is further emphasised by a newspaper owner and former governor of Abia State Orji Kalu thus:

The operational cost media houses have to contend with is huge and keeps rising daily. We are dying from the burden. Our businesses are suffering. From the cost of newsprint to ink, blankets and plates, our consumables in the print media are expensive. The Sun Publishing uses 2,800 tons of newsprint every month, for instance. Add that to the cost of freight, the dwindling fortunes of the Naira and power challenges, and it becomes obvious that our business terrain is facing more difficulties by the day. (Orji Kalu, July 17, 2016, Vanguard Newspaper)

Part of the operational cost of the print media is captured in the distribution of the newspapers which is either done by road or air at an expensive rate with the attendant delays in flights and challenges of bad road network nationwide. The burden of importation of newsprint and other consumables when the naira is probably at its all-time low has not helped matters. Kalu adds that if the situation remains unabated, media owners may be forced to either fold up or further deepen the crises in the unemployment market by “downsizing”.

As a way of salvaging the situation, most newspapers have increased their cover prices, and this has elicited unfavourable reactions from the reading public, which also is affected by the general economic downturn. On March 28, 2016, Punch Newspaper tried to justify the recent increase in its cover price thus: “Dear esteemed readers, from Monday, March 28, 2016, your favourite newspaper, The punch, goes for N200.00. We appreciate that times are hard, but we are constrained to increase the cover price because of the huge rise in the cost of production over the months, a direct consequence of the current economic challenges…”.

7. Technology

From the beginning, technology has been the most significant catalyst of the evolution, growth and advancement of the media newspaper inclusive. In the 21st century, the extent of technological progress has made the process of news gathering processing and dissemination a lot easier, efficient and widespread. However, the level of adoption of technology by newspaper houses in Nigeria is still low. Very few newspapers can boast of their standard printing press. In other words, they are not in control of the processes of printing their papers. Even though some of them are publishing simultaneously from more than one location, that practice is yet to be perfected. That is mostly why distribution by road and air is still a challenge in the industry. The adoption and full integration of modern ICT equipment in news gathering, processing and dissemination by newspaper houses, especially the government-owned outfits, is still an issue.

8. Challenge of the New/ Social Media

From the inception of the new media, many media watchers have expressed their apprehension that the newspapers will soon go under because of the convergence of all the mass media on one device through the new media. This trend has been linked to the dwindling fortunes of the newspaper business. However, it is also a known fact that newspapers both within and outside Nigeria have embraced the opportunities of the new media and are deploying same in some creative ways not just to keep up with the competition, but to advance their causes and stay in business. Most newspapers have their online versions which require a subscription to have full access. That in itself is a source of revenue apart from
the opportunity for digital online advertising. In as much as the new media holds a form of threat to the newspaper, scholars firmly believe that it will never force the paper out of business as there are still many people who rely on them for authentication of news.

9. Poor Working Conditions

Practitioners in the Nigerian newspaper space are poorly paid. There are no insurance covers for them even though they sometimes work in very hazardous conditions. Currently, many newspaper houses owe staff several month's salaries. This scenario in itself affects loyalty, commitment and adherence to ethics by the impoverished journalists. The hue and cry about the “Brown Envelope Syndrome” can only be checked if matters that affect the welfare of journalists are adequately tackled. Media owners are known to “live large” and operate parallel media outfits outside Nigeria where they do not owe the staff but leave their Nigerian employees to suffer. By and large, the newspaper industry has many problems to contend with, but with the creative and professional approach, the issues are not insurmountable.

10. Conclusion

When adequate attention is paid to the issues that have been identified as obstacles to the newspaper industry in Nigeria, the print arm of the mass media would have been empowered to add value to nation-building further. The formula needed to get the sector to winning ways requires the active collaboration of all stakeholders. The media owners, practitioners, regulators, the reading public and indeed, the government must recognise and accept the role of a healthy and functional newspaper industry naturally has to play in Nigeria’s development efforts. To do anything less or to the contrary, will amount to arrested development.

11. References


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