

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA AND GLOBAL INFORMATION EXCHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the role played by the media in Nigeria in the global information exchange. It discusses the image created for Nigeria as a fall out of the global information exchange and looks at the role the Nigerian media plays in the process. It all looks at the image Nigeria has as a result and what the media in Nigeria is doing about the image created for Nigeria. This paper also tries to look at possible options for a better image for Nigeria.

The emerging national discourse of a new branding project for Nigeria provides a back ground for this paper.

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA: AN OVERVIEW

Traditionally, when we talked about the media, we meant print, radio and television. Today, however, the advent of new technologies has not only created new platforms but has also blurred the lines that separated all media of mass communication, print and electronic. Therefore media is used in the context of this paper to cover all media or television, radio, internet, etc.

Nigeria has the biggest and most virile media community in Africa followed by South Africa and Kenya. (Park. 1993:1). In the area of publications (Weeklies, dailies and magazines) Ogbodu (1996; 1) identified 116 titles. With the advent of democracy, the number of publications have since increased, which is to be expected, due to political competition and special interests. However, a number of these publications are fickle and are barely at the margins of survival. Some die prematurely on arrival at the vendors' tables

As a result of a mismanaged national economy which has been on for over two decades

(be it the military era and even the present democratic dispensation), the hostile environment ensures that the combined daily circulation of all newspapers in Nigeria barely reaches half a million in a country of over 140 million people. If we add the circulation figures of magazines and other publication to those of daily papers, they barely hit the 1 million mark!

In broadcasting, there are close to 45 television stations, with about 10 of these in private hands, while of the 44 or so radio stations, a handful are privately owned following the deregulation of broadcasting by the state in 1994 (Bankole 1995; Olutokun 1996). Again, this number has significantly increased as new digital technology has made ownership of radio stations easier.

There are numerous internet media platforms that originate from Nigeria or hoisted by Nigerians in Diaspora as at today. Aside the websites of print and broadcast houses in Nigeria, there are now quite a number of online publications, and magazines, such as "Sahara reporters" and others, which are becoming new media platforms.

In the case of films, Nollywood, (as the Nigerian film industry is called) is growing in leaps and bounds. Although it is accused of lacking in depth and up-to-date technology, one cannot deny a growing viewership of its products across much of Africa and even parts of Europe, America, and the world. It is now reputed to be the 3rd biggest in the World, dwarfed only by Hollywood and Bollywood.

GLOBAL INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND NEW INFORMATION ORDER

There is a constant exchange of information going on every moment of the day in the global community. A look at the pattern of global information exchange shows an information order in which the western world is bombarding developing and underdeveloped countries including Nigeria with information disseminated through their powerful media. Such information comes with their established prejudices and stereotypes. The advent of new technologies particularly in the area of satellite and computers has even made it much easier for western nations to really flood the poor nations including Nigeria with their information and culture. In the process of the continuous global information exchange, images of persons, nations and countries are continually formed, or reformed in the mind of the global community.

A mention of several nations of the world brings to mind certain images. For instance, in the light of recent events in the US and the information exchange that has gone on since then, America has reinforced a positive global image as a land of hope, opportunities, possibilities and fulfillment of dreams for any one irrespective of race or creed. Obama ensured this positive outlook. Compare this with the mention of Afghanistan or Iraq. Compare also with Nigeria, which is the subject of our discussion. What image of Nigeria comes to mind when Nigeria is mentioned.?

NATIONAL IMAGE

At the moment, no one can deny that Nigeria has a battered national image. As soon as a Nigerian travels to any other country in the world and identifies himself as a Nigerian either by his green passport or by verbally affirming so, he or she automatically becomes a "suspect" for various types of wrong behaviour, including criminal actions. A Nigerian gets "special" discriminatory treatment at foreign airports the moment he or she submits his or her passport. He or she is sometimes subjected to vigorous body searches, asked all manner of questions, etc, some very personal and degrading whilst nationals of other nations are smoothly welcomed into that country.

Nigerians are generally perceived as a corrupt, selfish, noisy, criminally-minded and dubious set of people. Nigeria's current negative image has a serious effect on direct Foreign investment and at individual level, causes great pains and embarrassment to honest Nigerians. There is no doubt about this. As someone said, reputation or image is everything. Didn't the Holy Bible admonish us that a good name is better than riches? The crisis in the Niger Delta has exacerbated this negative perception. The internet images of Europeans, Americans and Asians held hostage in the creeks by money seeking mercenaries and criminals masquerading as liberation or freedom fighters is an eye sore. This fearsome appearance of hooded, sinewy, muscle-flexing and artillery-wielding youth holding sway in the swampy creeks of the Niger Delta has sent mortal fear down the spine of foreign investors. How can they court death in the name of investment? It is self-immolatory.

THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN MEDIA

Whatever the role of the foreign media through the countries global information exchange and even against the background that information flow is perceived to move from the rich global North to the south with its associated prejudices and perspective, one thing is clear- the Nigerian media plays a critical role in creating an image for Nigeria.

If anything, it is usually the first source of information that the foreign media obtains and uses. And given the background of their powerful media, such news or opinions become powerfully loud especially if they are "negative".

The media in Nigeria provides information of a critical nature, and it shapes the discourse agenda in ways that project Nigeria's image, this way or that way. The media is crucial to opinion formulation and eventual outcomes of events. Should the Nigerian media be blamed for the obvious negative image that Nigeria is afflicted with in the committee of nations? Should the Nigerian media be blamed for not countering what some perceive as prejudices or deliberate negative reporting of the media of other nations about Nigeria?

Has the Nigerian media done enough to rebrand Nigeria and dress it with the garb of a beautiful bride that must be courted by foreigners, tourists and investors? Have we not allowed the foreign media to dictate the tune and tenor of what our image and

perception should be within the international community?

At the moment, Nigeria's minister of information, Prof. Dora Akunyili's first step at starting a new re-branding of Nigeria's image has been to heap all the blame for Nigeria's bad image on the Nigerian media for always playing up the negative without telling the world the positive achievements. Is her position correct?

The media's function in whatever platform remains fundamentally to report, show or reflect what happens in society. Its function is not to "manufacture" news. It merely reports what it sees or hears and in the process sets agenda for society. For instance, not too long ago and at various times, the new minister who was then the Director-General of NAFDAC got the media together and in their presence, gleefully made a bonfire of fake drugs. Who got accolades and who was praised to the high heavens for doing a good job? Professor Dora Akunyili! Was the act of burning fake and adulterated drugs not a patriotic duty and was the media not patriotic in reporting what it witnessed? Was the reporting not positive for the war against fake and adulterated drugs, but negative for Nigeria's image as a haven of fake and adulterated drugs?

The Nigerian media only reports what it sees. Besides, if there were no fake drugs to publicly burn, the media wouldn't have manufactured reports to project Nigeria as a people where some persons have such a great love for money and a scant regard for life and go on to flood the country with fake drugs such that at a point in time, 70% of all drugs consumed in the country were fake. The Nigerian Tribune said in a recent editorial "Information and communication Minister, Professor Akunyili, is trying hard to do a good job on the country's battered image. Professor Akunyili has been going encouraging them to tell stories about Nigeria, even if those stories about Nigeria, are nothing but falsehood." Herein lies her dilemma.

The position of Akunyili actually points to the difficulty her project entails. Many in position of authority hold similar views. Senator S .N. Anyanwu, Chairman Senate committee on communications said recently: "The attitude of Nigerians and the publications in our media have not helped matters. No media criticize its government and people like our media does". They are both wrong. The American media, for example, is more vibrant, more critical, more fact-digging,, more dust-raising and more nosy than the Nigerian media. They mould opinion, alter courses and dictate direction. The American press is more critical of its government than the Nigerian media is of its government. It was the media in America that exposed the Nixonian Water gate scandal. It was the American press that exposed the Clintonian Irangate Contra scandal. What of Guatemano bay scandal which is daily exposed by the media. And we are being told to shut up and to see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil?

CAUSES OF NIGERIA'S BATTERED IMAGE

Much of what is responsible for Nigeria's battered image, it is submitted, is a direct product of the negative activities of the leadership of the nation. It is not the Nigerian

media that launders money, milks the country blind and buys choice property in other global capitals of the world. In fact, it is not the Nigerian media that exposes money laundering by Nigerians buying properties in Dubai, London, South Africa, US and Paris with stolen and ill-gotten wealth. It is the top Nigerian government officials, Ministers, governors, civil servants and former heads of state, who engage in such activities that perennially give Nigeria her battered image of a corrupt nation where nothing thrives better than sleet, bribery and corruption.

What is critically responsible for Nigeria's negative image is traceable to the entrenched negative behaviours of our own people and not a product of a negative global information exchange to the detriment of Nigeria. It is neither a product of an ill-intentioned foreign media keen on putting Nigeria down at all cost or a product of a critical Nigerian media committed to negative reporting as opposed to positive reporting. Facts are sacred. A sore remains a sore that oozes with putrefaction even when bandaged with beautiful lace material and sprayed with a designer perfume.

THE WAY FORWARD

For Nigeria's image to be redeemed so as to bring such benefits as inspiring greater international excitement about the country and ultimately attracting more foreign investments, something must be done as a matter of extreme urgency.

The Nigerian media in whatever media of mass communication, be it radio, film, television, print or internet, should pay greater attention to investigative journalism. Media houses should commit resources and time to this type of journalism so as to expose those who engage in negative practices that give Nigeria a bad name.

Exposure of those who engage in fraudulent and corrupt practices, embezzlement, drug peddling, 419, "otokoto"(ritual killings) and other such negative activities will deter others from engaging in such activities. So, if anything, the media must not relent in exposing the corrupt but should rather deepen and sustain its efforts. It is better to deal with a problem from the roots than to bother with its symptoms. To do so is akin to cutting off the branches of a tree with the erroneous belief that the roots and tap root will thereby be affected. No! Buds will sprout out, then foliage, tiny flowers, then branches, and the tree metamorphoses into a more gigantic one.

The media should ask questions why our Common Wealth is being frittered away and siphoned to overseas bank vaults. They should unravel the irony of living in abject penury in the midst of such plenty; the dilemma of washing hands with sputum even whilst living by the river bank. It should ask questions about all excess crude oil sales, about the energy sector, about the economy, the dilapidated infrastructures, the tension-soaked political environment; about insecurity, corruption and inaction in government. They should expose the criminals in our midst, the fake and adulterated drug barons, the black market currency dealers, the property speculators; those who perennially hold the common man down so that they can remain "ministers and V.I.Ps of waste" (apologies to Major Kaduna Nzeogwu Chukwuma in his speech during the 15th January, 1966 coup d'etat speech).

On the issue of branding or re-branding Nigeria, the Federal Information Ministry should outline clear measures it will be taking to reduce corruption and malpractices in all facets of our national life rather than of belly-aching and blaming the media in Nigeria, or trying to shut up those who draw attention to the ills of the nation.

Again, with a firm commitment on the part of the government, manifested in actually dealing with corrupt individuals and institutions through appropriate jail sentences (instead of decorating such persons with national honours, the government can then honestly see and embrace the media's partnership to project such positive things such as reporting the punishment meted out on the corrupt and thieving and the regurgitation of their wealth.

In the present attempt to re-brand Nigeria, government should adopt the practice of goal government, service delivery, accountable, transparent, timely and truthful. The Freedom of Information bill should be passed into law as a matter of urgency to ensure full disclosure of government activities. There must be effective action taken against corruption while embracing a culture of excellence, performance and accountability in governance. Governance should not be shrouded in secrecy and mystery.

Efforts should be made by government to positively engage the Nigerian media in its efforts to brand or rebrand Nigeria so as to create a platform to dismantle negative stereotypes and fixations and tell the good news about Nigeria on a daily basis.

The Information Ministry can not do it alone, nor succeed by emasculating the very media that will be used in prosecuting the "war" against negative perception of Nigeria by Nigerians and foreigners alike. It will tantamount to clapping with one hand. No one can play Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.