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The Commercialization of the Nigerian Press: Development and Implications

by Lai Oso*

Abstract

A central theme in the history of the Nigeria press is its political orientation. This is understandable, although it has led to the neglect of other aspects of the history and contemporary structure of the Nigerian press. This paper explores one of the crucial yet neglected aspects of this history, i.e. the origin of the process of commercialization of the press and its implications for journalism practice. It argues that commercialization signalled the end of the so-called 'political' press which many commentators still refer to. It also led to some form of professional consciousness and the need for a professional organization among Nigerian journalists.

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Commercialisation de la Presse Nigérienne: Développement et Implications

Résumé

Le thème central dans l'histoire de la presse nigérienne est son orientation politique. Ceci se comprend, bien que cela ait conduit à la négligence des autres aspects historiques et de la culture contemporaine de la presse Nigérienne.

Cette dissertation explore l'un des aspects cruciaux pourtant négligé de l'histoire tel que l'origine du processus de commercialisation de la presse et ses implications dans la pratique journalistique. Il affirme que la commercialisation a tiré la sonnette d'alarme de la fin de la soit-disante presse politique dont parle encore à ce jour beaucoup de commentateurs. Elle a également conduit à une sorte de prise de conscience professionnelle et au besoin d'organisation professionnelle parmi les journalistes nigériens.

Introduction

Most, if not all, historical accounts of the Nigerian press are premised on its overt political nature. This is probably largely due to the fact that the Nigerian press has its root in the anti-colonial agitation of the frustrated Lagos elite whom a Nigerian historian, Ayandele (1974) described as the 'deluded hybrids'. Golding and Elliot have remarked that 'Nigerian journalism was ... created by anti-colonial protest, baptised in the waters of politics, and matured in party politics' (1979).

This legacy has continued to influence both academic and popular assessment of the Nigerian press. The tradition is so embedded in popular consciousness that it has more or less obscured other aspects of Nigerian press history. A consequence of this is that academic discussion of the press has been stultified. It seems to me that the history of the Nigerian press should be rescued and placed in its proper perspective. This is especially important bearing in mind that the Nigerian press of today has been greatly transformed by many other factors, most decisive of which was the entry of big capital into the industry. This began with the arrival of European financiers from the middle of this century.

Therefore, it is important that, while we must not forget the origin of the press as an organ of political agitation, we need also to critically analyse other neglected areas of the history of the press. In this task, one of the crucial questions we should ask is: How did the structure of the present press come about? The Nigerian press, as constituted now, is a commercial press. This paper will trace the origin of this process and its consequences for the organization of the press and journalism practice in the country.

The Genesis of Capitalization

The capitalization of the Nigerian press and its subsequent commercialization started with the arrival of the *Daily Times* in 1926. The paper was established by European financial interests represented in the Lagos Chamber of Commerce in alliance with some wealthy Nigerians. A wealthy and influential Nigerian lawyer, Sir Adeyemo Alakija, who was opposed to the radical wing of the nationalist movement as embodied in Herbert Macaulay and his outspoken paper, the *Daily Service*, was made the chairman. Before the arrival of the *Daily Times*, most of the earlier newspapers were owned and managed as one-man businesses, the owner being the editor, reporter and, in most cases, the printer.

The *Daily Times* started off as any modern business concern, with a board of directors and some shareholders. Apart from this, the *Daily Times* was very unequivocal in its attitude towards local politics. The policy of the paper was set out in its first editorial on June 1, 1926. In it, the founders said: 'Like our great contemporary, the *London Times* — the Nigerian *Daily Times* is a national newspaper and will be attached to no particular creed or party... except, occasionally, and in particular, grave

matters, we shall perhaps for several years to come maintain a detached attitude towards local politics which have never up to now risen above petty personal squabbles' (quoted in Echeruo, 1976, p. 16). According to the official history of the paper, this seemingly apolitical policy has been scrupulously maintained (*ibid.* p.15, see also Jose, 1975). The point is that commercialization, among other things, led to a gradual depoliticization of the Nigerian press, however incomplete the process may seem.

It could be argued that because the *Daily Times* was established by hard-nosed businessmen with their minds and eyes set on financial success and profit-making, the paper could not afford to be political like its contemporaries. As a business concern, the paper had to depend on advertisements; most of the advertisers were expatriate traders who were not sympathetic to the nationalist cause championed by the indigenous press. Accordingly, a non-political, foreign-business-supported paper like the *Daily Times* 'was right from the start assured of both Government and private business patronage by way of advertisements and it did not have to depend on its nationalist favour to remain in business' (Echeruo, 1987, p. 8).

The *Daily Times* had started a process which accelerated with the establishment of the *West African Pilot* in November 1937 and became crystallized with the second acquisition of the *Daily Times* by the London *Daily Mirror* Group in 1947.

The *West African Pilot* was established by an American-trained Nigerian journalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe, who later became Nigeria's president. With his American background, Zik (as he was called by his admirers) brought a lot of new ideas into newspaper writing and presentation (Coker, n.d. p.20). In the area of newspaper organization, Azikiwe brought the idea of newspaper chain into the industry in Nigeria. The *Pilot* was the leader in Azikiwe's Group of papers established in many towns which were politically and economically strategic. Politically, they were important to him as a politician. Economically, they had high potential for higher circulation attracting advertisements in those urban centres. It is, therefore, not surprising that Azikiwe described these ventures as 'successful business'.

Just like his 19th Century forebearers, Azikiwe downplayed the economic aspect of his journalistic enterprises. Rather, much capital was made of the political ideal — the struggle against alien rule. Many commentators have uncritically accepted this. However, there was more to the establishment of these papers than just political propaganda. According to Azikiwe, the establishment of the papers was part of his 'efforts to be economically secure and free from want' (Azikiwe, 1970, p.286). He had gone into journalism, among other reasons, to demonstrate that it could be a successful business enterprise. Within a year of establishing the *Pilot*, he was able to say:

After one year of existence, we declare a dividend of 15 per cent. For the years 1939–43 we declare 71/2 per cent for each year. In 1944, it was 12 per cent. The year the war ended, it was 15 per cent; in 1947, it was Nil, in 1949, it was 20 per cent (*ibid.*, p.301).

From this initial base and the capital accumulated in the newspaper industry, Azikiwe diversified into other areas, including banking; he established the African Continental

Bank in 1944. Other companies included Zik Enterprises Limited, Nigeria Commodities Limited, and the Nigerian Printing Supply Company Limited. This could be said to be the beginning of the twin process of diversification and concentration in the newspaper industry in Nigeria.

Thus, despite its ostensibly overt political character, the *West African Pilot* and others in the group were set up as commercial enterprises, a factor which was also reflected in their news content and presentation.

The popular view on the contribution of the *West African Pilot* to the development of journalism in Nigeria is usually based on its anti-colonial stance. The paper arrived when most of the earlier newspapers were dying and the *Daily Times* which was technically and commercially the most successful newspaper then could not fill the gap. It could be argued that for Dr. Azikiwe, apart from his own nationalist and political interests, in order to succeed, his papers had to be opposed in editorial policy to the *Daily Times*. The *West African Pilot*, therefore, continued the tradition of the pioneers. According to a prominent nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the *Pilot* was regarded as 'a fire-eating and aggressive nationalist paper of the highest order' in the tradition of Herbert Macaulay's *Lagos Daily News*, and the Nigerian *Daily Telegraph* (Awolowo, 1960, p.82).

However, our contention is that the *Pilot* should be seen more as a commercial newspaper than as a purely political one. In other words, a notable contribution of the paper to the development of journalism in Nigeria was in the commercialization of the sector. This process reached its height with the London *Daily Mirror* take-over of the *Daily Times* in 1947. It continued with the arrival of Lord Thompson in 1958 as a partner with the Action Group in the establishment of the *Daily Express*. Although some of the post-war newspapers continued to support certain political parties, they now saw themselves as commercial enterprises first and as party organs second. For instance, in a May 14, 1958 editorial, the *West African Pilot* declared it was a commercial organization. 'This paper must survive either as a commercial concern or political enterprise. But we are the former — at the moment at least — and being so, we intend to maintain our independence whilst upholding the principles of the Party' (quoted in Sklar, 1963, p.455).

The Post-war Origins

In his comparative study of the emergence of journalism in France, Germany and England in the early 19th Century, O'Boyle (1968) showed that English journalists became self-conscious as professionals distinct from political activists and the press separated from party politics earlier than in the other two countries because of the early industrialization in England. Unlike in England, German and French journalism remained weak and indistinguishable because of the relative backwardness of the French and German economies. In other words, the development of popular mass entertainment press is related to the level of economic development (O'Boyle, 1968).

The post-war situation in Nigeria, to some extent, followed this pattern. The commercialization of the press towards the end of the 1940s was made possible by other developments in the country, especially the higher level of economic activities after the Second World War. These made possible the establishment of mass circulation newspapers, independent of the political parties and also able to employ professional journalists. For instance, by the 1940s, the number of wage-earners had increased. There was also an increase in urbanization. Along with these factors was the increase in the level of education and literacy. This accelerated after the Second World War, culminating in the establishment of the University College of Ibadan in 1948. The higher level of circulation was evident in the case of the *Pilot* in 1938 and in 1945-46. In 1938, expatriate firms withdrew their advertising patronage following the cocoa crop hold-up by producers who responded to the 'instigation' of the indigenous press. In 1945-46, the colonial government withdrew official advertisements from the *West African Pilot* because of the paper's criticism of the government. On the other hand, the *Daily Times* relied on advertising patronage of foreign firms to sustain itself.

On the supply side, the development of railway and road transportation reached its maturity with the launching of the Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme and the Colonial Development Programme from 1946. The Nigerian press also benefitted from the development of cheaper and better printing technology. The economic situation was evident in the memorandum written by a *Daily Mirror* director who was involved in the 1947 acquisition of the *Daily Times*:

The prosperity, present and future, of the country was, of course, of the maximum importance to any newspaper enterprise. I made many and detailed enquiries into the situation.

At that time (1947) the position was good. To my mind the future was full of promise. There were prosperous coal and tin mines. There had at that date, as I wrote 'never been a completely adequate survey, but the Government is starting now...It is hoped there is oil. Altogether there are big development plans in being...'

I was confident about the country and, therefore, about a new newspaper's prospect (reproduced in Echeruo, 1976).

The commercialization of the press involved changes in the organization of the press and the production of news. For instance, it signalled the end of the earlier situation, when the proprietor was also the editor-journalist. The early journalists, as we have pointed out, were at the same time proprietors of their papers. They were often professional lawyers, doctors, engineers or printers first and journalists second. With this commercialization, the proprietor was now more concerned with providing the finances and laying down the paper's policy while he employed professional journalists charged with the responsibility of daily production of the newspaper.

The arrival of men of capital ready, for whatever reason, to invest in the newspaper business is a notable feature of the commercialization of the press. The *Daily Times*, as mentioned above, started this process and it has continued till today. As Ross, quoted by Schiller (1981), noted in the American situation:

In contrast to the recent past 'now that the provider of newspaper capital hires the editor instead of the editor hiring the newspaper capital, the paper is a factory where ink and brains are so applied to white paper as to turn out the largest possible marketable products' (p.184).

Further, while the pioneer proprietor-editor regarded themselves as politicians or, more appropriately, as anti-colonial crusaders and their newspapers as political organs for the achievement of certain political goals, the professional journalists were more likely to see themselves as disinterested chroniclers of events.

Professionalism in the Press

The employment of professional journalists constituted another aspect of the changes dictated by the move towards a commercial press. As professionals, journalists often draw on certain values, routines and ideologies in the production of news. These values, routines and ideologies were 'forged in the workshop of a commercial press serving historically particular needs and interest.... News evolves then in response to a range of imperatives in its market situation which become incorporated in the working routines and beliefs involved in its production' (Golding and Elliot, 1979). An aspect of this market situation is the demand for larger circulation and the need to satisfy a heterogeneous readership. To meet this commercial imperative, the press now emphasizes how objective and neutral the products they supply are. Comments are now separated from facts. As Golding and Elliot noted, 'The search for new and larger readerships draws the press away from a strident factionalism and toward a more central band of opinion, in which a mix of apparent neutrality and entertainment makes a paper attractive as much as influential' (p.25). The adoption of an 'apolitical' editorial policy by the *Daily Times* is a reflection of this historical tendency.

The employment of professionals as producers of news also involved a change in the style and presentation of news. This change was most noticeable in the *West African Pilot*. As we have already pointed out, Dr. Azikiwe introduced many innovative features of this 'new journalism,' as Coker called it (Coker, n.d. p.39). This included the introduction of American style of sensational reporting, the use of pictures, banner headlines, short sentences and paragraphs, thus ending 'the ponderous political essays, long-winded and high sounding phraseology typical of the ... 'Black Victorian' of Lagos' (p.18).

The change in the style of news presentation and language reflected the change in the *West African Pilot*'s definition of 'who makes news?' A historian of the Nigerian press has said: 'For the first time the smiling face of a third-class clerk in the government or commercial houses appeared side by side with that of a lawyer or politician. Gone, clearly, was the day when newspaper publicity was the prerogative of only those at the top of society' (Coker, n.d. p.20). It seems logical that the language employed by the paper must be within the frame of reference of this new class of newspaper

personalities. This use of situated language had been successfully done by earlier American newspapers in their effort to forge a new style and convention of news reporting and professional ideology. According to Schiller, situated language is the 'writing that attempts to locate itself — and the reader — in recognizable conventional contexts; it is a writing in which the author conventionally attempts to approximate the speech of everyday life' (Schiller, 1981, p.110).

Moreover, to the *Pilot* there was a human-interest angle in any event and, as such, it placed a great emphasis on human interest stories through banner headlines. Such headlines were 'boxed' with decorative borders giving them an attractive appearance. In short, in this 'new journalism' news became entertainment. According to Coker, 'the day-to-day domestic and human problems of the people were being dramatized for the reader's entertainment and pleasure' (Coker, n.d. p.43). As another Nigerian historian has noted, 'the era of the mass appeal had come' (Biobaku, n.d., p.viii). In essence, the *Pilot* introduced a measure of sensationalism into the Nigerian press. This mass appeal paid off in terms of circulation. In the mid-1940s, the average daily sales of the paper was put at 20,000 'by far the greatest ever (sic) in the history of the Nigerian press' (Coker, n.d., p.20) up to the time.

The success of the *Pilot* must have led to a lot of re-thinking in other newspaper establishments. It must have also kindled a new spirit of competition for readership which could not have been satisfied by appealing to only political allegiance or anti-colonial nationalism. The *Daily Mirror* take-over of the *Daily Times* in 1947 was part of this process. The competition of the 1950s included:

Early arrival at the market and in the physical appearance of the newspaper. Competition in the remuneration and general conditions of service offered to working journalists. Competition for the best freelance writers and photographers. Competition in the news-gathering organization, in pictorial journalism, in sports reporting, display, and general features (Coker, n.d. p.25).

For instance the *Daily Times*, which was the main rival of the *Pilot*, 'was revived in a 'new look' garment tailored with all journalistic frills and drapery by the new *Daily Mirror* Management' (Coker, *ibid*, p.37). A prominent part of this 'new look garment' was 'a conscious policy of human interest and highly pictorial journalism amongst a predominantly semi-literate people combined with brilliant technical production and widespread sales organization to place the *Times* well ahead of others' (*ibid*). Furthermore, in its bid to attract a larger readership, the *Daily Times* became a tabloid 'and splashed news photographs across its *scintillating* pages'. The change soon paid off. Coker continued: 'In a predominantly illiterate country, its very generous and skilful use of photographs and other illustrations very soon sent its daily circulation spiralling far above those of its contemporaries — 25,000 in 1951, 40,000 in 1953, 55,000 in 1955, 80,000 in 1957 and 96,000 in 1959. In 1961 it struck the all time mark of 114,000' (Coker, n.d., p.25).

It should, of course, be noted that the style, presentation and subjects of the 'new journalism' were imported from the West. Such style of journalism was developed by

the so-called American Yellow Press. One lesson to be drawn from this discussion is that competition among the Nigerian papers from the end of the 1940s meant that they had to pay more attention to presentation and style in order to reach a larger readership. To this end, better trained professional journalists were employed who, to a very good extent, saw themselves as journalists first before anything else. Such journalists were more likely to see themselves as distinct from politicians. The arrival of foreign-owned newspapers, especially the *Daily Times*, contributed greatly to this development. According to Coker, 'because the *Daily Times* was unattached to any political group, the staff lacked the missionary or crusading spirit which motivated journalists in the indigenous papers' (Coker, n.d. p.39). In a sense it could be said that the 1950s started the process of depoliticizing the Nigerian press.

By the 1960s, the sense of professionalism among Nigerian journalists had increased. 'Gone (was) the almost fanatical sense of political mission. The working journalist of today regards himself, before anything else, first as a journalist by profession and a labourer worthy of his hire' (Coker, *ibid*, p.58). Another writer on the Nigerian press has noted that the most important factor in its development in the 1960s was the growing professionalism among the press corps. 'With increasing scope for promotion and greatly expanded opportunities for training, journalism has become a career rather than a form of casual employment. There has been a slow, but unmistakable rise in standards, while a new sense of occupational solidarity has appeared among the more sophisticated writer' (Chicks, 1971, p.126). Part of this professional consciousness was the setting up of a professional association, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), in 1954 with a code of conduct for its members, and the Guild of Newspaper Editors established in 1961. In 1962, the Guild also published a code of ethics for all journalists.

What we are driving at is that commercialization of the press and professionalism which followed it led to the separation of journalism from what could be called 'the political-literary hybrid it had been hitherto' (Golding and Elliot, 1979, p.23). Commercialization also lessened the high political profile of the press from the late 1940s. It became more interested in reaching larger readerships. In doing this the press had to draw on certain centrally held opinions and values. An important aspect of this is the ideological stress on guiding values and ideology, and include the ideas of objectivity and neutrality and the larger concept of press freedom. Another aspect was the change from the Victorian style of writing of the pioneer owner-editors to a simpler and easier-to-read style characterized by short sentences and paragraphs and the use of pictures. The model of this 'professional journalism' in terms of style and philosophy, including the values and ideologies which informed its practice, were imported from the West.

However, as we mentioned above, the separation of politics from journalism has remained incomplete in Nigeria. The ghost of the past still walks tall in the Nigerian newsrooms. Although there are no more party-owned newspapers, journalism is still often seen in terms of the attainment of certain defined national goals — national unity and development. This, it could be argued, is more or less contrary to the ideals

of professionalism with its stress on neutrality, objectivity, disinterestedness and autonomy. Reconciling the demands of the two models creates a lot of tension and conflicts. As Golding and Elliot, (1979:31) have pointed out 'the dual allegiance of (Nigerian) journalists to the attainment of professional and political goals has created conflicts whose resolutions in daily practice underpins much contemporary Nigerian journalism'.

One way of resolving these conflicts is through the journalists' commitment to 'development journalism'. The theoretical and intellectual forebearer of development journalism is the debate of the media's role in national development popularized by mainly American scholars like Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, among others in the 1960s. The implication of the practice of development journalism is that the autonomy of the media is circumscribed by and subordinated to nationally (elite) defined political and economic goals. The mass media thus become instruments (Nigerian politicians would say partners) for the prosecution and attainment of these goals. Many journalists and media managers sincerely subscribe to this notion of the role of the press (see Jose, 1975). This is partly responsible for the vestiges of political journalism in the country.

Another factor is the nature of Nigerian politics itself. There is still a lot of ethnic dimensions to Nigerian politics. The three main political parties that existed between 1960 and 1966 were by and large ethnic parties. This pattern was largely repeated on the return to civil rule in 1979. As these parties assume power, they set up newspapers to defend and advance their interests and policies. Accompanying this development was the ethnicization of the press as these political parties had their main support bases in each of the main ethnic groups. It is worth mentioning that geographical location of newspapers, ownership, and ethnicity are linked. Ownership of newspapers by state governments further consolidates this situation.

Conclusion

In concluding this article we may point out an irony of history: the *West African Pilot*, which pioneered the commercialization drive in the press, was among the major victims of the trend. Unable to adjust to the heavy demands of the needed capital and other requirements involved, the paper died in the 1970s. Its death was, of course, accelerated by the civil war (1968-70) when the Ibos, who formed the bulk of its readership after independence and its proprietor, Dr. Azikiwe, left for Eastern Nigeria.

As of now, it is clear that no newspaper could survive without a large capital outlay or base. In other words, only those people who have access to large capital could hope to successfully launch a newspaper. And this is what has been happening.

This development has led to a lot of changes in the political economy of the Nigerian press, most notable being the change in the structure of ownership and control and in the content and orientation of media. Briefly, as we pointed out in the paper, newspaper contents seem now to be determined more by commercial and circulation considerations than political ones. In terms of the ownership and control

profile, the Nigerian press is now interlocked in a chain of companies or conglomerates embracing many diverse sectors of the economy. (Oso, 1989).

Some of the issues raised in this paper need to be properly addressed in future studies. Nigerian scholars seem to have paid very little attention to the contemporary situation of the country's mass media and culture industry in general.

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