

HOW THE PRESS IMPINGES ON THE POLITICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL SUB-SYSTEMS

1. The Media and the Society

1.1 *The Interface between the Media and the Society*

The media exist in the society to service the society. Where there is no society, there would have been no need for the media. Therefore, the media come into existence because there is a society in which they can function and are therefore an integral part of the society. Strictly speaking, the society can do without the media, meaning that it does not need the media to operate, but the media need the society to operate in. Most advanced societies have grown better because the media boldly pointed out their deficiencies and these were corrected.

The mass media include the newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and now the Internet. They pass across the same information to a heterogeneous audience at the same time. No single person can achieve the feat of reaching millions of people simultaneously. But the mass media can do this. This ability has widened their power. Media power has grown with the promotion or pursuit of collective goals. Like Giles (1991: 199) notes, journalists are exposed to power- the power of the institutions and the elected officials that they cover and also the power that resides in the daily newspaper. However, it must be pointed out that the press is not an institution consistently dedicated to the accumulation of power and its exercise over other institutions or people's lives.

There is an interface between the media and the society. The press exists in the society and mirrors the happenings and events in that society. The society allows the press to operate in it by keeping it informed, educated, and entertained. The press informs about events and issues in the government, the economy and the environment – both far and near. It educates by teaching new skills and even finding new uses of already familiar things. It entertains through the provision of interesting programmes like music, drama, sports, etc.

The society is like the human body made up of many other systems. These systems work harmoniously to make the economy function effectively. Each sub-system has its interconnected components and attributes which combine to effectively make it impossible for any other sub-system to do its own work.

Example: the circulatory system is the body's blood-pumping system and consists of the heart, blood vessels, and lymph vessels that pump blood and lymph round the body. The respiratory system relates to how the body inhales and distributes oxygen and exhales carbon dioxide. But the respiratory system cannot do what the circulatory system does even though both are sub-systems in the body.

In this paper, we will examine the relationship between the media, the political and the socio-cultural sub-systems.

2. The Political Sub-System

This sub-system talks about the political institutions, structures and rules of governance. There is an interaction between the political and media personnel. This interaction is aimed at regulating their societal functions and resolving conflicts in their relationships whenever they arise. Traditionally, journalists and politicians have conflicting roles to play.

According to Gurevitch and Blumer (1977:273-274) the components of political communication may be located in:

- i) Political institutions in their communication aspects
- ii) Media institutions in their political aspects
- iii) Audience orientations to political communication
- iv) Communication relevant aspects of political culture

Put differently, **political communication** is the interrelationship between the political and media institutions that are involved in the preparing, processing and disseminating of information and ideas to, and from the mass citizenry. However this relationship is hinged on mutual power relationships. The media have their own power base and so do the political institutions. The power of the latter is rooted in the **legitimacy of authority** established over the years and upheld by the other sub-systems in the society. Like Gurevitch and Blumer (p. 274) write, the power of the political institutions radiate from their functions as the articulators of interest and mobilizers of social power for purposes of political action. The power of the media lies in the adage that he who wields the pen is mightier than he who brandishes the gun. Can the pen shoot? The journalists shoot with their pens and their awesome power lies in their relationships with their readers or viewers. The purveyor of information is usually a power source.

Media power arises from three roots. Gurevitch and Blumer (p.274) list these as:

1. **Structural root:** The mass media serve a mass audience and can presumably deliver this as an *audience* to a politician. Circulation figures and audience ratings give rough estimates of the number of people reading a newspaper or magazine or listening to a radio or watching a television programme. This number of people is otherwise *unavailable* and *unreachable* to the politician. Since most people are media consumers, it is conclusive that the message of the politician would be heard and possibly acted upon by these media consumers.
2. **Psychological root:** This root of media power stems from the credibility and trust that the different media houses have built up with their readers or viewers over the years. These media consumers have come to believe the information presented to them by the individual medium they read, listen to or watch.
3. **Normative root:** This root of media power springs from the combination of structural and psychological roots. It is the ability of the media to **forcefully** and **willfully** intervene in the society or in any political process.

For the journalists there are no *embarrassing questions* only politicians who are *embarrassed*. The conflicting role of public officials and journalists make them traditional adversaries. The journalists want to expose to the public what the officials want to keep hidden, especially if such may not stand up clearly to public examination. When the press **intervenes** like this and beams the spotlight on these officials they are forced to comment on issues labeled as **important**.

The role of the press is not limited to *harassing* public officials and politicians. Even members of the public have used the press to their own advantages. Thus political events like rallies, demonstrations, conventions etc are timed to the appearance of reporters and the cameramen. Since *bad news* is *good news* to the press, they report such things and give these **opposition groups** free publicity.

The interventionist role of the media in crucial times of conflict has helped to insure media independence, safeguard citizens against blatant abuses of office and build up the free expression of ideas and opinions in a liberal democracy. Wise politicians are therefore cautious of whatever they do because media light can be beamed at them and they do not want to appear ugly or caught off guard.

2.1. Nigerian Politics and the Media

In Nigeria, the media join other bodies to force out whatever it sees as undesirable. The press has really impinged on the Nigerian political system. From the pioneer newspaper in Nigeria, the *Iwe Irohin* that started publishing in 1859 under Henry Townsend till today, the press has played active roles in Nigerian politics. *The Anglo African* (1863-1865) was the second newspaper to be published in Nigeria. It was the progenitor of the fiery Lagos press. From its inception, the colonial government made attempts to stifle and kill the paper. The then colonial government of Lagos Colony headed by Henry Freeman wrote to the Secretary of States for Colonies in London to:

- i) Impose a tax on any newspaper in Lagos so as to tax them out of existence or cripple them financially.
- ii) Allow only a paper that would be controlled by the government to operate without the payment of this proposed tax.

Luckily for the Nigerian press the Secretary did not approve these proposals. *The Lagos Weekly Record* (1891-1931) was established to crusade for equality, human liberation and public welfare. This paper was the first militant nationalist paper in Nigeria. This newspaper teamed up with Nigerian nationalists trying to oust the British colonialists. The *West African Pilot* (1938-1947) and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe's chain of newspapers became deeply involved in the fight for nationalism. The newspapers were so fierce in their attempts at frustrating the erstwhile colonial masters. Maybe as a counter action the ex-British colonial masters established the Public Relations Office in Lagos as a clearing house for information between 1948 and 1960.

The cry for Nigeria's political independence was at an all high and Nigerian journalists were boldly championing and advocating this without apologies. Media and politics have always gone hand in hand. A London newspaper group bought over the controlling interest of the *Nigerian Daily Times* and re-baptized it *The Daily Times*. Then in 1960, Nigeria became politically independent. Yet the political system did not stop impinging on the media. Indeed the then Western Region of Nigeria established the first radio and television station in Africa in 1959 to counteract British allegations against her premier, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The Eastern Region established her own broadcasting station the next year. In 1962, the Northern region joined by establishing Radio Kaduna. Up till date, the different states have been busy establishing broadcasting stations to ventilate their political ideologies. Now that Nigeria has more political

parties and more states, it is expected that more radio and television broadcasting stations would be established to champion the political beliefs of their founders and discredit those of the **opposition**. Even in our present democratic setting, the press has been actively used to propagate the so called *dividends of democracy*. The political institutions and the people behind them have actively engaged the press for one reason or the other.

However, the political sub-system has not allowed the press to be as free as it would wish. It has rolled out laws and some of them are quite obnoxious. In 1903, the Newspaper Ordinance required all printers and publishers to compulsorily supply all details about themselves and their publications to the government. They were also expected to publish their addresses on the imprints of their publications and post a bond of £250. This law applied only to southern Nigeria as there were no newspapers then in the North. The 1909 Seditious Offences Ordinance was promulgated by the then Governor Walter Egerton after Herbert Macaulay attacked him for shielding his friends from criminal prosecution on the accusation of corruption. Macaulay had widely circulated a pamphlet accusing the governor and his friends of corruption in the building of the Nigeria railways.

The Printing Press Regulation Act of September 1933 was introduced to control the proliferation of printing presses, which ostensibly were used by the nationalists to harass the colonial government. This law barred the keeping of a printing press without a court declaration. The deponent was expected to state his address and what he uses the press for. Failure to do so attracted a fine of £100 or six months imprisonment or both. In addition, every publication must clearly show on the last page the name of the publisher and the printer and their addresses.

Other laws have been made by the political sub-system to make the work of the journalists a little more challenging. One of such is the Official Secrets Ordinance which made it an offence for civil servants to divulge information classified as *official secrets* to any other person outside his duty schedule or work routine. The law simply limited journalists' access to information and information sources, as journalists are not part of the civil service.

In 1976 and 1978, Decrees number 11 and 31 were promulgated to establish the Nigerian Press Council. The journalists rejected the Press Council as they saw it as inquisitory. Then this Council was given wide-range powers including the power to seize the publication from and close any *erring* media house. The obnoxious Decree Number 4 of 1984 sought

to make journalists divulge their sources of information and protect public officials against *press invasion*. This decree sent two Guardian journalists- Irabor and Thompson- to prison. However this decree was abrogated in 1986.

Even today, Nigerian journalists and their supporters are actively campaigning for the passing of The Free Information Act.

The Nigerian Press has not only focused attention on the political institutions of the nation but also on the individuals running them. Apart from the government owned and controlled media, every other media house in Nigeria joined hands to *force* now retired General Babangida to step aside in 1993. Shonekan succeeded him as the Head of Interim National Government. His successor, the late Sanni Abacha was declared a dictator and all his known evils were chronicled. The press saw him as *evil* and he *lived up* to their prophecies. Under his dictatorial regime many journalists were killed, imprisoned or *simply disappeared*.

Even in today's democracy, the press has remained vociferous in attacking the deficiencies of the Olusegun Obasanjo regime. He has been accused of ruling the country from overseas, since the press says he spends more days jetting to other countries than he spends inside the country. Tony Anenih was thoroughly embarrassed with the disclosures of youthful Oyaji that he commissioned him to assassinate the present Governor of Abia state, Dr. Orji Kalu. However their mission failed and people rose to ask a lot of questions. Oyaji was later to deny his recorded confessions. The Nigerian political scene has been in turmoil especially under the backdrop of many unresolved assassinations of some politicians.

It is most difficult to say whether the press will stop impinging on the political sub-system and vice-versa. For today, both are intertwined in a dance. A few times they dance in step. Most times they dance out of step and like gladiators seek for the jugular veins of the other.

To summarize this section, it is pertinent to point out that the media link the political process to the people through the provision of information to the people of a state with the aim of getting them interested in political developments. The more information the people get, the more they are assumed to be more politically aware and interested. The media are also to *raise* the goals of the society.

Examples: the need for development and spreading of information on these new goals; protecting the interest of the public against government insensitivity and from other fellow citizens and righting the wrongs in the society.

3. The Sociocultural Sub-System

The socio-cultural sub-system deals with the culture of the society. Every culture serves a particular society. Therefore no society is culturally barren. Marx (1965) defines culture as the definite activities of the individuals and their definite ways of expressing their lives. The way these individuals live their lives coincide with their production patterns and even what they produce and how they produce it!

Culture can also be seen as the accumulated growth of man's power over nature. This is determined by instruments of labor and passed across as signs, thoughts, knowledge and language. Culture is transmitted from one generation to another and speaks through social organizations, technologies and language.

How does the press impinge on the socio cultural sub-system of the society? The cultural theories of mass communication have attempted to explain this by reflecting that the media mirror the structures of the society and its cultural values. The mass media are seen as a societal tool with which the society looks at and repairs itself. Indeed Dewey (1927) is of the opinion that communities, not isolated individuals, use the process of communication and the communication media to create and maintain the culture bonds and sustain them. The media impinge on the socio culture by the way we create, share, learn and apply culture in our daily lives. The media affect the society because they affect **how** culture is created and sustained. As earlier noted, culture is the learned behaviour of members of a given social group. The media report the changes in culture, shared understandings and social norms. Whatever the media reinforce is usually reinforced in the society.

The media impinge on the society through:

- i) education
- ii) technology
- iii) popular culture
- iv) economy
- v) personal relationships

2.3.1 Education: The culture of a people determines how they produce things. Most educational institutions- formal and informal- use the media to pass across their messages. The media **teache** the necessary **how-to-do it skills** to the society. Experts are used by the media to teach other people how to do something.

Example: the Maggi Cooking Competition sponsored by Nestle has taught thousands of Nigerians different ways of combining local condiments to turn out delicious meals. By watching the demonstrations, other amateur cooks have learnt some tricks. Even the veterans have improved on their skills.

By laying emphasis on formal education and the benefits accruing from such, most people have left their agrarian backgrounds to flock into the schools. In the Nigeria of today, most people do not believe that you are somebody to reckon with if you are not yet *certificated*.

In most cities, working mothers take their under-aged children to schools because the media have painted such behaviour as desirable. These little tots spend more hours in the schools than with their parents even though most of them spend these hours sleeping or eating biscuits!

2.3.2 Technology: Technology simply means how something is done using the available skills and equipment. Most technologies are culture based. It was a media hype calling for technological transfer in the 1970s and 1980s from the developed to the developing countries. Can technology really be transferred?

Local media have published local technology and even improvement on what already exists. Thus new leaps in technology are celebrated. When Nigeria developed her first car, the media told the whole world about it. When local means of preserving food items were discovered the media made sure that the society knew about these novelties.

The media are still impinging on our technological culture by pointing out easier, better, cheaper and faster means of production and doing things. They tell about new developments in other parts of the world and how we can appropriate these to our benefits.

2.3.3 Popular Culture: Some theorists feel that media effect is more pronounced on culture. Local or folk culture has fallen into disrepute while popular culture is rising. Story telling and local music making is declining within the nuclear and extended family systems. The elderly people no longer gather the younger ones under the trees when the night falls and the moon comes out to hear or tell folk stories and sing songs. Peer groups hardly compete. In fact nuclear families now gather in front of the television set in the family room to watch popular culture. The media are now used to create forms of culture that structure daily living. Whatever the media approve of is the *in thing*.

When Michael Jackson the popular American musician wore *jump up trousers* on stage, all the young men and women took off to either cut off some inches off their trousers or made new ones to look like him. When the late Nigerian Afro beat musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti stamped his approval on hard drugs and unconventional life style, many young people aped him.

Enzenberger (1974), Jhally (1987) and Hay (1989) claim that the media are deeply involved in the **commodification of culture**. According to them popular culture is mass-produced and distributed in direct competition with locally based culture. The media are seen as an industry specializing in the production and distribution of cultural commodities. Because the media can reach a larger audience simultaneously, they have grown at the expense of small local producers (who may be limited to small communities). Thus in creating popular culture, they have also created **disruption of the community life**. Thus local cultures are subverted and pseudo folk cultures are created and used to transform daily life. Nazi German foisted the belief that the Aryan race was superior to every other race in the world. The German media propagated this. The Germans therefore exterminated millions of Jews during World War II. Millions of other souls were lost and the whole world went to war.

2.3.4 Economic: How the people earn, invest and spend money is usually determined by culture, especially when we recollect that acculturation starts from birth.

The media point out new economic and investment opportunities and even advises against investing resources in prospects that may not yield profits including employment. In present day newspapers, adverts are run showing new investment opportunities. Some even teach how to start small-scale enterprises and the pitfalls to avoid. The underlying belief is that if the businesses succeed, they would have positive impacts on the society. Globalization is the new word in economic practice. The internationalization of production and financial transactions have reduced the world into an economic ball. Capital is now moved around the world at the pressing of buttons. The result is that 'boundaries and borders of all sorts are being re-imagined or re-figured in complex political and cultural ways'

The media also impinge on the society's economy in a different way. The elites that have economic clout wield this to gain control over and exploit media institutions to their own advantage. According to the political

economy theories, the elites use their economic powers to manipulate the society and impose a hegemonic culture. The hegemonic culture maintains the dominant position in the society and forms a platform for ideological and political power.

The media therefore have lent themselves as a tool for economic national planning. The government has used the media to propagate different economic policies. A dissatisfaction of the present day situation is painted. Based on this, a better picture and therefore the need to engineer something better for tomorrow or make a change is presented. Most people are keenly interested in either doing or getting something more and better.

2.3.5 Personal Relationships: The media even impinge on us as persons. The modern mass media dominate our daily communication by supplying us vital information on peer group culture, convenient entertainment, advice and even companionship. From about three years, small children start watching television and can identify the popular actors. Television and other media channels become daily companions to older people most of who have retired from active life. Their children may have grown up or even left to start their own families. Some of them sit down to read newspapers or watch television.

According to Baran and Davis (2000:77-78) the media are at the center of the complex network of relationships that define a community. The media become our servants to facilitate our public discussions and debates. They guide. At times too, the media make or break personal relationships. Many lives and marriages have been wrecked by media invasion and reports of liaisons that should never have come to the public notice. Many top government officials have been kicked out of office with the public exposure of their corrupt practices. Many artistes have become popular and household names because they got media coverage.

4. Summary

The media do not operate in a vacuum. Rather they are a sub-system within the society's sub-system. This paper has established that there is a relationship between the mass media, the political and cultural sub-systems. It has looked at the various roles the media play in the ordering of the political institutions and rules of governance strictly to regulate their societal functions. The media perform their roles because they have the power to prepare, process and disseminate information and ideas to and from the mass citizenry. The media impinge on the culture through

influencing society's education, technology, popular culture, economic and even personal relationships.

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