The Media as Fourth Estate of the Realm

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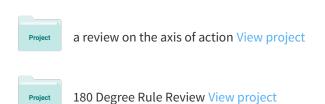Covenant University Ota Ogun State, Nigeria

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THE MEDIA AS FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM

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INTRODUCTION

The political structure or landscape of many societies and nations are now, more than ever, tilting towards democracy- a system of Government that supports governance of the people, by the people and for the people. Democracy would, however, only remain a mirage until the freedom of the press is guaranteed since the media or press, usually referred to as the fourth estate of the realm, remain one of the most vital channels through which the provisions made for the freedom of expression and access to information, which are seen as fundamental human rights, are guaranteed.The mass media are often seen as fulfilling the vitally important role of *fourth estate, the guardians of democracy and defenders of the public interest.*

Liberal theorists argue that the existence of a free and independent press within each nation or political system is essential to the process of democratization as they contribute to the right of freedom of expression, thought and conscience and the strengthening of the responsiveness and

accountability of Governments to all citizens bringing about good governance and human development

The power of the press arose from its ability to withhold or give out information (McQuail, 2010, p.168). In other words, the role of giving accurate information to the Nigerian citizenry is one of the major roles of the Nigerian Mass Media. The role of the mass media as the "fourth estate" of the realm implies that the media is also a lawmaker in itself. How? The agenda setting theory of the media will be discussed with reference to this. This chapter will also focus on if the Nigerian Mass Media is truly performing its role as the fourth estate of the realm.

THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a political system in which the people of a country rule through any form of Government they choose to establish. In modern democracies, supreme authority is exercised by representatives elected by popular suffrage where the people vote for persons to represent their interests in Government. In this case, there are elections whereby persons or members of the public cast their votes for a candidate to represent their interests in Government, with the candidate with majority of votes cast being the winner of the election and the representative of the people. These representatives are principally responsible to the citizens or people who are referred to as the electorate, putting power in the hands of the electorate who could impeach any representative found lacking in his or her assignment.

Democracy engenders practices such as the rule of law, checks and balances and the freedom of expression and association ensuring that there is accountability and transparency at all the three levels or arms of Government which are the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. These three arms of Government are all a part of the Government still creating a gap between them and their followers and so to ensure adequate accountability, there is need for an external independent body serving as a form of check and balance for the three arms of government. The media therefore serves as the fourth arm of Government performing the duty of society's watchdog and ensuring the government's accountability to the people and also at the same time ensuring the participation of the governed in the process of governance.

However, for democracy to be fully actualized, the role of the media cannot be made light of as the mass media serves as the link between the government and the governed taking over the public sphere or public space and creating a platform for communication and development.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ESTATE OF THE REALM

Thomas Caryle, a 19[th]century historian attributed the use of the "estate of the realm" to Edmund Burke. Edmund Burke was an Anglo-Irish political theorist and statesman and was famous for the quote "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing". He saw the importance of the Press in the medieval era. (Gentzkow, 2006, p. 187)

Burke said there were three estates in parliament: The Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal and the Commons. However, Burke emphasized that the "reporters' gallery" was far more important than the earlier listed, and thus, referred to the "reporters" as the Fourth Estate of the realm.

For Carlyle (1899, p.139), Fourth Estate is not a figure of speech or a literal fact. During the medieval era, the fourth estate was also referred to as the press because the press was the only prevalent form of media prior to the coming of television and radio. For Carlyle, Printing is equivalent to democracy. In other words, printing is democracy. The rights of people in choosing their leaders is greatly affected by what is said in the press or carried by newspapers. Carlyle's point of view is still prevalent today. This will be seen and proved in the discussion of the theories attached to these perspectives.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

A theory is an abstract system of concepts and their relationships that help us to understand a phenomenon (Turner &West, 2010, p.46). In other words, a theory helps us to understand what is going on and why such an issue is going on. There are many theories that exist in the world today, especially with regards to communication.

In Mass Communication alone, there are more than 100 theories explaining each facet of communication- Interpersonal communication, intrapersonal communication, group communication and mass media theories.

In talking of the media as the fourth estate of the realm, we have established the notion that the media itself is democracy. Whatever happens on the democratic scene is largely influenced by the media. In other words, the media can also be referred to as "subtle law makers". In establishing this fact, two theories will be put into consideration:

AGENDA SETTING THEORY

The agenda setting theory was originally formulated in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. It explains the relationships between the emphasis that the mass media place on issues and the importance that the mass media attribute to those issues (Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, 2009, p. 31).

However, the foundation of this theory was laid by Bernard Cohen in a famous quotation he made in 1963: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."

If we take a closer look at this statement, we will find out some key concepts.

1. The media will not tell you what to think.
2. The media will tell you what to think about.

In other words, the media may not change one's perspective about an issue, but the media has the subtle power of making one think of an issue. In the past month, the kidnapping of the Girls from Federal Government College, Chibok by the Bokoharam sect has been all over the media and consequently all over the mouths of almost all Nigerians. This is evident in the way it is being publicized through the social media with the phrase "Bring Back Our Girls."

In other words, the agenda setting theory portrays the idea that media do not tell people what to think, but what to think about. The idea of Agenda Setting has been with us since the days of the penny press (Baran, 2010, p.293).

There is an important relationship between media reports and people's ranking of public issues. When the media begins to place priority on a particular issue in the society, it creates a notion that the issue is important and as such causes public debates and several talks on the issue. In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important role in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs, 1972, p.176).

The Nigerian media has successfully used the Agenda setting theory in improving the Nigerian democracy, but it can do better. This will be discussed in latter parts of this chapter.

PRIMING

Priming is a theoretical concept used in tandem with the agenda setting theory. In agenda setting theory, the idea that the media draws attention to some aspects of political life at the expense of others is called priming. Priming portrays the idea that even the most motivated citizens cannot consider all that they know when evaluating complex political issues (Baran, 2010, p. 295). The basic assumption of the Priming theory is that media images stimulate related thoughts in the minds of the audience (Wikipedia, n.d). Holt (2013, p. 110) states, "Media scholars define priming as a mental process in which certain aspects of an issue are made more prominent by media and thus more influential in guiding a person's judgment. Priming works because people tend to be cognitive misers, paying more attention to information that is readily available or more easily accessed, than that is readily available to them."

Iyengar, Peters and Kinder (1982) first identified that there is a dimension of powerful media effects that goes beyond agenda setting. Political media primig therefore, is the process by which political issues receive the most attention in the media more than other issues, thereby influencing the standard of public assessments or evaluation of the performance of political actors or election of candidates.

FRAMING THEORY

In 1974, a sociologist - Erving Goffman developed frame analysis to provide a systematic account of how we use expectations to make sense of everyday life situations and the people in them. Goffman was fascinated by the mistakes we make as we go through life – including the mistakes we never notice. He argued that as humans, we constantly and often radically change the way we define or typify situations, actions and other people as we move through time and space (Baran, 2010, p. 331).

How do the media come into this theory? The media framing theory is based on the study of understanding, especially through systematic interpretation of actions and texts. This theory provides a rather "intriguing" way of assessing how media can elaborate and reinforce a dominant public culture.

For Goffman, the media framing theory simply focuses on "how people or individuals learn to routinely make sense of their social world." Most of this framing research is focused on journalism and on the way news influences our experience of the social world.

One of the most important areas of framing theory is the media research in journalism and political communication. As the media maintain a fourth estate role in democratic societies, media researchers find framing theory helpful to analyze the imbalances and underlying power structures that mediate political issues. It helps to also detect journalistic bias in political issues (Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, 2009, p. 31).

THE GUARDIANS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Over 200 girls were abducted from Government Secondary School, Chibok by the Boko Haram islamic sect on the night of 14-15 of April, 2014. The issue had wide condemnation and protests both within and outside Nigeria, presumably because the media had set the agenda. However, the media would not have talked about it if people were not talking about it- on their Facebook walls, on their phones, on their twitter pages, in restaurants, in public places and so on. This is where the term "public sphere" comes in.

The term "public sphere" was used majorly by Jürgen Harbemas, a German sociologist and philosopher who said that the emergence of public spheres like coffee houses would enhance critical discussions of societal issues.

The public sphere refers to an area in society where individuals can come together to discuss societal issues, or rather, issues happening in the society. Through these discussions, "political actions" are influenced. When the abduction happened, many associations met and many committees were formed in order to help find the girls. That is a platform that can also be referred to as the "public sphere". The media of course gave Nigerians the information on the campaigns, the protests with regards the girls. As we speak, it has gone worldwide, and the United States has decided to help the Nigerian Government find the girls.

Every society is divided along class lines making communism, an economic cum political system, an ideal yet to be achieved by any nation. This is due to the fact that every society has the ruling class and the ruled and even Plato acknowledged this fact saying that persons that would be in the ruling class should be philosopher kings, persons who had the wisdom to handle the affairs of the State.

Most societies have the government and the governed, the Bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the feudal lords and the serfs, the King or Queen and their subjects and so on. The existence of this class distinction has however created a conceptual gap in society referred to as the public sphere or the public space. This is the idealistic space that exists between those in the ruling class and those in the class of the ruled. However, it is necessary that there be a bridge or link connecting these two factions of society and ensuring that their interests are duly represented.

Modern societies today also experience the existence of this gap but the media has taken over this space and thus serves as a bridge or link between the government and the governed and even though they do not tell people what to think, they rather tell people what to think about through their agenda setting function. The media therefore in occupying this public sphere provides information two these two factions of society and serves as a form of check and balance in society performing the role of society's watchdog and society's radar simultaneously (The surveillance function of the media).

Access to information is essential to the health of democracy for at least two reasons. First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or mis-information. Information serves a "checking function" by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them.

Governments, it is argued, cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill informed about the actions or activities of officials and institutions. The watchdog press therefore serves as the guardian of the public interest, warning citizens against those who are doing them harm. A fearless and effective watchdog is critical in fledgling democracies where institutions are weak and pummeled by political pressure.

When legislatures, judiciaries and other oversight bodies are powerless against the mighty or are themselves corruptible, the media are often left as the only check against the abuse of power, cutting their excesses. The media also serve as a conduit or bridge between governors and the governed and as an arena for public debate that leads to more intelligent policy- and decision-making.

Castells (2000) corroborates this fact by saying that in almost all countries, the media have become the space of politics. To an overwhelming extent people receive their information, on the basis of which they form their political opinion and structure their behaviour, through the media and particularly television and radio.

The 'fourth estate' or 'the guardians of the public sphere' have overtime become increasingly converted into industries, wholly oriented towards the profit motive, just another business held by some conglomerate, bringing about the commercialization versus social responsibility debate. For Habermas the decline of the public sphere is linked to the triumph of instrumental rationality which he later discusses at length in his *Theory of Communicative Action.* Habermas pleads for the revivification of the 'life-world' which operates according to principles of communicative rationality, but which has been 'uncoupled' from 'system' which operates according to principles of money and power, reward and punishment. The instrumental rationality of the system invades or 'colonizes' the lifeworld and thereby erodes the public sphere.

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA: PLAYING THE ROLE OF THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM

The fourth estate performs conventional functions which collectively aim at building an ideal society, free and healthy enough to foster a true democracy. Some of the functions are as follows:

1. Information: The media gives people information on what is happening on the economic, political, socio-economic and international scene. Information is an important element in Nigerian democracy. As such, it is important for the media to give accurate information to the Nigerian citizenry because Nigerians will make their decisions based on the information they have.

2. Socialization: Nigeria has 250 ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have their distinct qualities. However, the media as fourth estate of the realm helps these ethnic groups co-operate with each other, especially with regards to national issues. When the media is enlightened, it enables socialization on the part of ethnic groups. It is the differences that exist among Nigerians that make Nigeria a stronger state than it used to be.

3. Motivation: when the media releases information to motivate or inspire the public or rather the Nigerian citizenry towards a particular set agenda, it is performing its role as a fourth estate of the realm. For example, carrying out campaigns on health issues such as HIV/AIDS, polio, Cholera and the Ebola Virus motivates the public to take extra precautions on their health.

4. Debates and Discussions: In exchanging of views by members on the society and with a platform provided by the media e.g. television shows, documentaries and so on, the media gives the citizenry the opportunity to air their views about the democratic and political situation of the country. Discussions also help politicians know the view of the citizenry and what they can do to up their game. Debates and discussions have helped the political situation of Nigeria.

5. Education: Education is the best legacy, especially now that knowledge has become the new currency. The media as the fourth estate of the realm helps in intellectual development of its citizens so that these citizens can in turn influence their societies positively.

6. Cultural Promotion: Nigeria is no doubt filled with various cultural communities. The media as the fourth estate of the realm helps to promote the cultural heritage of its community. In Nigeria, there are certain programmes which teach on cultures of past generations. Through these kind of programmes, a cultural trait will not be eroded form the minds of people.

7. Entertainment: Entertainment is no doubt topping the list in the Nigerian media today. Youths will rather turn to listening to music than to news. Entertainment apart from

football brings people together. Singing songs and watching films gives a sense of togetherness to the people actively involved.

All these functions only show that the place of the fourth estate in our democratic dispensation is indispensable.

Moemeka (2000, p.15) adds to this by talking about the Social Responsibility philosophy of media. For him, the media is obligated to providing the citizenry with information and discussion on important societal issues. The Social Responsibility Theory also "acknowledges the right of the nation, through its government, to ensure the security of the state". In other words, the media as the fourth estate of the realm help in informing members of the society and also help in ensuring the security of a nation. Its major tenet is "striking a happy balance between the freedom of the media and of the people to information and the right of the state to national security (Moemeka, 2000, p.15).

HAVE THE NIGERIAN MASS MEDIA SUCEEDED IN THEIR ROLE AS THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM?

The question to be asked is if the Nigerian Mass Media have succeeded in performing their duties as the fourth estate of the realm. For Fakoya (2010), currently, the Nigerian mass media are one "hotbed of corrupt and sharp practices." He describes the function of Nigerian journalists as centering around "collecting brown envelopes in order to write stories ruining the reputation of otherwise innocent people". For him, the Nigerian media have always been a corrupt body, with the journalists been a reflection of Nigeria's corrupt state.

Musa (1996, p. 82) posits that the media can help in attaching importance or unimportance to an issue by the frequency with which the issue is covered by the media. The media are labeled the watchdog of the society because of the role of the media is to arm citizens with adequate, quality information so that they can make rational choice in exercising their franchise. (Musa, 1996, p. 89). He adds that the Nigerian Mass Media are not presently exercising their role as the fourth estate of the realm due to reasons such as: influence of ownership and control, lack of commitment to professional ethics, giving of more priority to their pockets at the expense of the profession. He believes that these reasons have helped in "sedating the dog" of the Press.

Akpan, Ering & Olofu-Adeoye (2013, p. 2279) add to the reasons why the media in Nigeria are presently not functioning in their full capacity as the fourth estate of the realm. Such reasons also include: poor remuneration, high level of corruption in the media, lack of trained journalists and decline in professionalism. For them, the media as the fourth estate of the realm are "susceptible to manipulation positively and otherwise, regardless of time and space."

Ndibe (2011) insists that Nigeria's fourth estate of the realm is bedeviled by the "same pathologies that have afflicted Nigerian politics and other sectors of the nation's life including its law enforcement and academia." In other words, the problems that can be found in the Nigerian Mass Media are a reflection of the problems prevalent in the Nigerian society. For Ndibe, the fall of intellectual discourse among "supposed" media professionals and the catastrophic devaluation of moral currency in the profession have in no small way contributed to the decline in Nigeria performing its role as the fourth estate of the realm. Rather than engaging in falsification in order to claim the cheap money given to them by corrupt politicians, Ndibe believes that Nigerian journalists ought to commit to the service of Nigerian society by exposing the impunity of those who "mis-shape" and malnourish Nigeria as a country.

CONCLUSION

The functions of the mass media in relation to Nigeria's political development cannot be over emphasized. Hence, efforts should be made to pay more quality attention to the Nigerian media-television, radio, newspaper, magazine and social media. Journalists should be treated with more respect and paid better. The reporters in the medieval era were effective and efficient and professional at what they did and that was why they were accrued the fourth estate of the realm. Nigerian Mass Media can do likewise to be given their proper place in the Nigerian society.

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