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**WHEN MEDIA EXIST AS IF THEY DON’T**

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**Abstract**

*This paper reexamines the concept of democracy as it is practiced in Nigeria and establishes that it is*

*simply a rule of the minority in the garb of majority. The situation evolved from a gradual minoritization*

*process, which has translated the majority to minority. Interestingly, this process is glaringly promoted by the media. The unimpressive media involvement was demonstrated through media scans and a focus group analysis, which showed a brilliant neglect of critical components of the electorate by the media. The New Media scan also proved an insignificant fulfillment of respondents’ fundamental, contextual, personal, conventional and training expectations. The unremarkable findings recorded from a survey of the web news application showed a striking similarity with those of the traditional media. Until media scholars and professional communicators come alive to their responsibility through a mechanism of re-orientation, media will continue to exist as if they don’t.*

**Keywords**: Democracy, Majority, Media, Minority, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Many citizens in African countries, especially Nigeria, are not empowered at all or enough, to participate

in the affairs of their community owing to reasons that are traceable to the government and its agents,

media and citizens. Two of these three parties – government and citizens – are inactive or less active

simply because the third – media – are not doing their job well or at all, as they exist as though they don’t.

It is in this context that this paper will discuss the theme of this paper, which is life without the media.

**Public Interest, Democracy and Media**

The concept of public interest is tied to that of democracy and it has two basic perspectives – totalitarian

and democratic. The totalitarian perspective (Zarecor, 1959, p.277) stresses that public interest is

independent of the wishes of the citizens and can only be determined by political agents. But in a

democratic dispensation, government derives it authority from the citizens which makes it imperative that

public interest must be served and protected by that government.

Public interest in a democracy can be defined as a commonly held value, superior interest, moral

imperative or balance of interests (Sorauf, 1957:619-623). Public interest becomes a superior interest when it commands a special priority among the members of an interest group. In this case, interest groups can be very powerful and can have their way even if it is not consistent with the general will (Wright, 1996; Domhoff, 1998). Public interest is a moral imperative when you regard anything that brings happiness as in tune with what the public would like (Bentham, 2005). When public interest is presented as a balance of interests, what emerges is a compromise between the conflicting or competing interests in the society.

The commonly held value perspective preaches that something is in the public interest “if the general will

wills it” (Benditt, 1973, p.293). In this case, what is in the public interest may fail to be in the interest of some members of that public (Roxbee Cox, 1973, p.229) but the interest of the majority is what really counts.

Therefore, democracy, which is in tandem with this view, prospers so long as the majority of interests is

involved. The preponderance of the majority in a democratic dispensation is not a bad idea, as long as the

minority exists to prevent the dictatorship of the majority.

In this article, I demonstrate that the *minoritization* of Nigeria’s democracy has been carried to the extreme. What exists is no longer a majority rule but a system that has disenfranchised a larger percentage of the electorate, to the extent that the so-called elected representatives are only a mouthpiece of the minority which masquerades as the majority. Interestingly, the media have been the perpetrator of this minoritization process. In the end, the media which are supposed to be the means by which the minority and majority exchange ideas have

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massively undermined that role. Before this media-promoted scenario is fully exposed, it is necessary to explain how the majority of the Nigeria’s democracy has ended up as the minority.

**From Majority to Minority**

***The First Category: Barred by Time and Legal Constraints***

In Nigeria, eligible voters aged 18 and above are requested to register for upcoming elections. It is common, during such exercises, that the time allotted by the electoral umpire is inadequate, which means that millions of eligible voters are systematically ostracized from the exercise. For instance, in the voter registration that took place in January 2010, 73.5 million registered out of the projected 80-100 million in a population of 150 million.

The reason given by the Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), after expressing his

regrets, was that the electoral law that authorized the registration exercise allowed only two weeks for the

registration. The exercise was extended by one week, only after the electoral law had been amended. If the 80- 100 million projection is credible enough, what happens to about 30 million that could not register?

***The Second Category: Registered but did not Vote***

Voter apathy, owing to politicians’ insincerity, rigged elections, insecurity at polling stations, among others, is rife in Nigeria. This explains why many registered voters do not usually vote. According to INEC sources, less than 50 per cent of registered voters do turn out to vote in previous elections. (The exception to this was the 1993 presidential election, which was annulled by ruling military dictators headed by Ibrahim Babangida, on flimsy excuses and which they have apologized for). If less than 50 per cent of registered voters have turned out during elections, it means that in the April 2011 election, some 35 million people would not vote. A good proportion of this figure would be women, since women are less likely able to withstand the problems that characterize the electioneering system. When you add that to about 30 million who could not register, you have some 65 million voters that are excluded from the electioneering process.

***The Third Category: Physically Challenged***

Physically challenged persons have, since Independence in 1960, been the least reckoned group in the nation’s electioneering journey. The Nigerian government admitted in its 3rd Periodic Country Report (2005 to 2008) on the Implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples‘Rights in Nigeria, that there were no reliable figures on physically challenged persons in Nigeria. Therefore, 5 and 3 per cent estimates have been used for record purposes for children and adults respectively. The means that about 5 million of Nigeria’s adult populations are physically challenged persons.

***The Fourth Category: The Diaspora***

It is estimated that no fewer than 50 million Nigerians live and work beyond the shores of Nigeria. I am not going to reckon much with this form of disenfranchisement because it is a trend that is common with many countries of the world. But it is important to stress that the neglect of these vital portions of the electorate elicits a constant error in the nation’s electioneering system, “which is a consistent pattern that

marginalizes or overemphasizes certain sections of the population (Deacon, Pickering, Golding and

Murdock, 1992:42) especially when those sections are vital to the overall population.

**How Media Abets the Minoritization of the Majority**

**The Preliminary Issues: Functions and Constrains of the Media in Nigeria**

The media, according to Opuamie-Ngoa (2010:3) constitute an “avenue of passage” deployed by journalists to send messages to and receive feedback from a defined audience. Media, therefore, are the guards on duty, looking out for abuses and immediately making them known if found. The media thus become an avenue for the passage of interests out which some are powerfully contending, some weakly contending and some not contending. However, they have policy environment and infrastructural issues, among others, to face. In spite of these, the Nigerian media are regarded as among the most vibrant in Africa, with regard to their performance in a democracy. This claim may not be taken too far if the proposition that they promote the minoritization of the majority is real.

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**The Concept of Power and the Media**

The media, as the fourth estate of the realm, must provide the channel to inform the audience about the

development efforts of the government. In the same vein, the media provide audience the opportunity for

feedback and discussion. Media, however, reserve the right to control the contents that they publish. Since they are supposed to be objective, where objectivity is defined as the “ability to give every segment of the audience an equal right to be heard and seen, to read or to react.” (Omojola, 2008a: 175), it means therefore, that media should be universal in their coverage.

There is an issue here. If objectivity is agreed to be an equal right system, where then does the concept of power come from? The media are said to exercise considerable power with regard to their *agenda setting* capability. If one takes a critical study of this high- sounding phrase, one will find out that what is called power does not rest in the bosom of journalists but in the custody of some people else, as the following paragraph illustrates.

Regular procurement of raw material is germane to any manufacturing process and it is a critical factor in

the inventory of the factory’s inputs. Newsmakers are the sources who supply the ‘raw materials’ that

journalists run through their editorial mills before they are packaged as ‘finished goods’ in the form of

contents. “Journalists rely on newsworthy sources for information and opinion” (Roth, 2002) and at the

level of reliance one is in the state of need in order to survive. Therefore, the concept of power that

journalists have trumpeted over the years actually resides in the domain of newsmakers. If newsmakers go

on strike, newsmen’s pens will run dry. This is an issue for another day.

The issue of concern here is that as a journalist, the ethics of the job demands that every party to a story

must be represented. Therefore, the so-called power of the media can only be geared towards ensuring that representation. In this sense, it is not power, but simply putting in practice the ethics of the profession.

What is erroneously called power is actually the abuse of gate-keeping responsibility, which makes some

parties to a story more preponderant than others. According to Manzer (1984, p.580), “the model of

practical reasoning is … when, within the limits of reasonable foresight and care and appropriate regard for interpersonal differences, all wants of all persons are included in the decision-maker’s calculus.”

**Theoretical Foundation for this Discussion**

***Media Performance Assessment: A Summary of Conventional Methods of Enquiries***

Many media organizations cherish the ipso facto assessment whereby they look at how they are performing internally. However, the real criteria for media performance are usually situated in the external context. These include the media effect model, the Marxist critical approach, the media cultural studies approach and the social cost-benefit analysis, which assesses the goals of media communication in broad policy fields such as education, health and infrastructural development.

***Media Assessment on the Basis of Neglected Forces***

The foregoing methods of assessment sound nice but if one accepts the concept of objectivity which gives

every party to an issue an equal right of presence, then none of them seems appropriate to explain the

minoritization of the majority that has been championed by the media in Nigeria. I acknowledge that

several perspectives of objectivity exist (Entman 1989, Lichtenberg, 1991, McQuail, 1992, p.184; Cohen

and Young, 1973; Fishman, 1980). However, whichever way one looks at it, journalism practice becomes

unethical when some parties to a story are neglected. This paper assesses the media performance in a

democratic setting on the basis of the level of inclusion of parties to a reported issue.

**Methods**

In the first part of the study, two methods were adopted to demonstrate how the media encouraged the

minoritization of the majority. They were media scanning and focus group discussions.

***Media Scanning***

Three months issues (December 2010 – February 2011) of *The Guardian (of Nigeria)*, *The Punch* and *The*

*Nigerian Tribune* were scanned by this researcher and his assistant. They were scanned on the correct

assumption that there was a high reportorial profile on Nigeria’s electioneering system as part of the run up to the April 2011 elections. The three newspapers were a critical part of the Lagos-Ibadan media axis

regarded as the most powerful in Nigeria. The objective was to look out for the stories and photographs

published on the variables under study in all genres (news, news analyses, features, editorial opinions, etc.) and in all pages (front, interior and back) together. Three variables – INEC, Politicians and Registered

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Voters – were added to the four categories of neglected parts of electorate. The following table shows the

composite record of the scans.

**Table 1: *Results of the scan of three dominant newspapers in Nigeria in their three-month coverage of***

***seven electioneering segments***

No Item ***The***

***PunchThe Guardian Nigerian Tribune* Grand Total**

1 INEC 470 382 401 1253

2 Politicians 411 434 389 1234

3 Registered Voters 311 267 199 777

4 Legal & Time

Constrained

30 56 101 287

5 Registered but did not vote

51 34 61 146

6 Disabled Persons 7 4 1 12

7 Diaspora 6 10 16 32

Total by Media 1286 1187 1168 3741

Table 1 clearly shows that the four levels of neglect pointed were massively underreported when compared to INEC, politicians and registered voters. The massive underreporting of categories 4-7 spurred the writer to commit the issue to a focus group discussion.

***The Focus Group Analysis***

Two focus groups were constituted. The first, which discussed for 46 minutes, comprised six academics -

five in Mass Communication and one in Political Science and International Relations. The second, which

chatted for 72 minutes, comprised six lecturers also but almost in a reverse order – two in Mass

Communication and four in Political and International Relations. After fulfilling the conditions necessary

for a focus group system, the two discussions were aggregated and the following findings became easily

discernible.

 The two groups agreed with the minoritization analysis with few criticisms.

 One person raised the issue that at least one of the categories of the neglect was time bound. For

instance, he said: “I know that a responsible newspaper should regularly report disenfranchised

segments of the citizenry but I think such reporting becomes manifest mostly during election

times, especially after the elections have been held.” Three discussants also agreed with this

when the moderator raised the issue with the second group.

 The two groups unanimously agreed that the dominant media in Nigeria had a culture of

concentrating their reports on political office holders and seekers and the electorate who voted

them in and hardly on the excluded portions.

 All discussants unanimously agreed that long distances, time and legal constraints prevented

many eligible voters from the voter registration exercise that was held in January 2011.

 Each group was unanimous that the media focused on the reasons responsible for the

disenfranchisement (time and legal constraints, etc.) but hardly delved into the characteristics of

neglected sections of the electorate.

 Most members said they never came across a news report that focused on the enfranchisement

or disenfranchisement of physically challenged persons. Others were not sure. One said he saw

one associated story on a television channel.

 There was a sharp disagreement in each of the two groups with regards to why the media have

failed to report the neglected population. One side concurred that the media should be blamed

for not reporting these people while the other side said the fault could be from the groups

themselves.

 All of them hailed an announcement of the INEC boss to continue voters registration after the

April (2011) elections.

 With regard to recommendations, the most senior academic in the first group suggested that

Nigerian journalists need a reorientation in political communication and electioneering systems

in order to avoid the pitfalls of neglected electorate.

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 One discussant in the second group suggested political education as the panacea for the

problems but another countered, saying it was unfortunate that the press who should perform

that task was itself politically uneducated.

**The New Media**

The analysis carried out so far only reflects the perspective of the traditional media form. The new media

as typified by the Internet was also surveyed to determine how it has impacted Nigeria democratically. The study here was subdivided into two. First was an expectation study and the second - another scanning

round of an Internet news application.1 The application had a robust news and search engine platforms

dedicated to Nigeria. It is important to stress that this website does not publish news of its own. It only

agglomerates results of search queries and news about Nigeria from several sources and presents them to

its Nigeria audience.

**Expectation Study Parameters and Findings**

An analysis of expectations (Williams, 2004) of those who visit the site was carried out in the following

five categories to determine how it fulfilled them.

 Fundamental

 Training

 Conventional

 Personal and

 Contextual

This categorization, though simplistic, provides us with a useful structure to measure significantly

an audience’s level of satisfaction in a media communication process from a socio-political and cultural

standpoint. It helps to contextualize the empowerment that ICT and the new media purports to offer

citizens of developing countries. Contextual expectation refers to the packaging of information in a

particular context in order to enhance the comprehension of information that is being sent. Expectation by

convention refers to those communicative customs and practices on the cyberspace that can be assessed by an audience just like its counterparts elsewhere. Personal expectations focus on how precise the service is to each audience member. Fundamental expectation is in terms of application’s ability to communicate to its audience in the language it understands. The training dimension is indicated when a service promotes the visitor’s interest, skill and knowledge of the internet.

This paper relies on the findings of the studies (Omojola, 2008b, 2009) carried out between 2006 and 2009 to determine the fulfillment of these expectations among the three dominant ethnic groups (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo) in Nigeria. Respondents’ ratings of the fulfillment of expectations were carried out twice in each of the three areas. Ratings were highly insignificant throughout. In the Yoruba area, the first rating – *(F* ***(4,*** ***709)*** *= .181, p < .948)* in the five categories of expectations correlated at 0.59 percentage point with the second rating - *(F* ***(4, 710)*** *= .530, p < .714)* at 0.14 significance level. For the Hausa area, the first rating - *(F* ***(4, 909)*** *= .272, p < .738)* also correlated at 0.63 with the second *- (F* ***(4, 925)*** *= .720, p < .314)*. For the Igbo area the pair assessment of the first rating *(F* ***(4, 816)*** *= .377, p < .678)* and the second *(F* ***(4, 871)*** *= 1.142, p* *< .148)* correlate at 0.61 percentage points*.*

**Site Scans and Results**

The news platform surveyed displayed well over 2,000,000 news, features and news analyses from December 2010 to February 2011. The system had a program which crawls thousands of sites and agglomerates the major stories in accordance with the levels of importance given them by their publishers. A total of 2, 567 most important stories were reckoned during the period. Out of this figure, 1,452 focused on politics, 563 on the Nigerian economy and the rest on science /technology, health and other topics. It is important to mention that unlike the three newspapers assessed, the news application aggregates from well over 300 news sources which gives an impression of a deeper source of information.

The following table shows the distribution of the political stories into the seven variables.

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**Table 2: The composite finding of the scanning of web news application in Nigeria in three-month**

**coverage of seven electioneering segments**

No Item *The*

*Punch*

1 INEC 341

2 Politicians 653

3 Registered Voters 320

4 Legal & Time Constrained 47

5 Registered but did not vote 77

6 Disabled Persons 3

7 Diaspora 11

**Total by Media** 1452

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The results from the four studies - print media scanning, focus group discussion, expectation studies and internet media scanning – have demonstrated that lack of visibility of the neglected part of the electorate can be exacerbated by non diligent media. When a critical part of an electorate is not visible in the media, civic vitality is stifled and democracy is jaundiced. The unenthusiastic democratic environment prevailed because the media was less alive to their responsibility. If the media sleep, the nation sleeps. I recommend the following:

 A waking up process must be floated whereby the media must be alive to its responsibilities.

 This waking up process can be promoted by non-governmental organizations and Journalism

scholars who can no longer remain neutral (Stark & Kelly, 2006, p.13-14). They must rise up to

their responsibility as the father in the business and brush up their children – journalists- in the

way they should go through reorientation programs and workshops.

 Journalists should endeavor to appreciate the view of objectivity that calls all parties to a story.

When a journalist defines his or her concept of objectivity this way, chances are that the

neglected portions of the electorate will always be in remembrance. Journalists must extend their

“limited range of their temporal interest” (Ungerleider, 2006, p.71) and be universal in outlook.

**End Notes**

1. The web news application studied can be found in Google Nigeria

(http://news.google.com.ng/news)

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