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GAINS AND PAINS OF LIBERALISATION OF BROADCASTING IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Taking a swipe at common misapplication of concepts like deregulation, privatization, and commercialization in describing the contemporary situation of broadcasting in Nigeria, and arguing that the concept of liberalization best describes the current state of that industry in the country, the paper examines the benefits and problems that came in the wake of the epoch. And observing that the merits of liberalization outweigh their demerits, the paper recommends that the NBC should step up its regulatory role. And while calling on broadcast stations to restrict their signals to allotted frequencies, the paper also charges them to accord the greatest priority to educational programmes.

Introduction

Since the 1930s when the British Empire Broadcasting Service of the colonialist floated the relay re-diffusion system in which subscribers had access only to “channels” “on” “off” on their “radio sets” (Salihu 2004:15), broadcasting, ‘the transmission through space by means of radio frequencies of signals capable of being received either aurally or both aurally and visually by the general public’ (Chester et al, 1963 cited in Nwanwene, 1995:2), has metamorphosed from colonial government monopoly in Nigeria into regional governments’ domination of the late 1950s and early 1960s (Duyile, 2004:287), and has passed through the era of Federal Government annexation and monopolization of 1976 to 1992 (Momoh, 2002:32) to the dawn of contemporary liberalization that accommodates private participation (Momoh, 2002:43).

Misapplied Concepts

But many scholars and mass media stakeholders have used several words wrongly to describe the advent of the phenomenon of joint public and private ownership of the broadcast media in Nigeria. Such words include “privatization”, “deregulation”, and “commercialization”. It is common to read or hear statements like “the task of administering the deregulation of broadcasting has been an arduous and demanding challenge...” (Salihu, 2004:15) or “it surely must rank as

one of the greatest ironies in contemporary Nigerian history that it took the Military to deregulate the broadcast industry,” (Shehu, 2004:18), or “deregulation was one of the policy instruments with which the Military administration...tried to use to achieve the objectives of the structural Adjustment Programme...” (Duyile, 2004:310) or “by 1994, the gains of deregulation of the broadcasting industry had begun to manifest” (Udeorah, 2004:24). Other examples include statements like: “Some were rightly cynical when Dr. Christopher Kolade was tasked by the regime to produce a blueprint for the commercialization of broadcasting in the country” (Shehu, 2004:18), or “privatization of broadcasting has brought many benefits to Nigerians”, etc. erroneous statements like that abound, both in electronic and print media, as well as in academia. But since the objective of this paper precludes criticizing authors, no further example is cited. But due to the common misuse of those words to describe contemporary situation of broadcast media ownership in Nigeria, it is necessary to pinpoint the most appropriate of the lot. Common dictionary definitions would suffice for that purpose. What is *privatization*? Something is said to be private if it pertains exclusively to an individual, or when ownership of something is restricted to an individual or group, in contrast to state, public, or government ownership. Privatization is therefore the process of converting something from public or government ownership to individual or group ownership. But privatization can only describe specific organizations that were formerly publicly owned, but which ownership had been transferred to private concerns. There is no local example in the broadcast industry. But the recent sale of Daily Times of Nigeria, a print medium, is sufficient to drive the point home. This analysis shows clearly that the word privatization is absolutely inapplicable in describing the contemporary broadcasting situation in the country. It is therefore a misnomer to say that the broadcast industry in Nigeria had been privatized. And what is *deregulation*? To regulate means to direct, control, adjust, tele-guide, or put something under rule. But according to the 6th edition of the *Oxford Advance Learners’ Dictionary*, to deregulate means to decontrol: the exact opposite of regulation. Therefore, deregulation means the total removal of control or moderation of an enterprise. This shows clearly that the concept of deregulation is not applicable to contemporary broadcast industry in Nigeria, since broadcasting has never been, nor will it conceivably be ever free from one form of statutory control or the other, not even in advanced economies and democracies.

Another commonly misapplied concept is *commercialization*. Meanwhile, the word *commerce* was derived from the Latin word *commercium* and this according to the 10th edition of *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, was formed from the combination of *com* with *merc* or *merx* from *merchandise* which means trading or trade. Therefore, commercialization is the process of transforming a non-trading or non-profit making organization into a profit driven enterprise. And while there

is no gainsaying the profit motive in the proliferation of private broadcast stations, nevertheless money making has never been a paramount factor in the establishment of government owned broadcast stations. In other words, the entire broadcast industry in Nigeria is neither completely commercialized, nor is the whole industry solely profit driven. It is therefore erroneous to describe the contemporary broadcast industry in the country as haven been commercialized.

Appropriate Concept

What about **liberalization**? To be liberal means to be generous, tolerant, and accommodating. And since liberalization is the process of converting an enterprise that was hitherto exclusive, restrictive, and limited into one that is inclusive, open and accommodating, it best describes the contemporary situation in the broadcast industry in Nigeria. That poses a question: how did Nigeria get to the landmark of liberalization?

The Legal Basis of Liberalisation

The seed for the liberalization of the broadcast industry in Nigeria was sown in the 1979 constitution. Section 39 of the Document inter alia, stated that “...every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions provided that no person, other than the Government of the Federation or of a state or any other person or body authorized by the president, shall own, establish or operate a television or wireless broadcasting station for any purpose whatsoever” (Momoh, 2002:49). The important point in this context is the provision of the constitution that “... any other person or body authorized by the president...” could “...own, establish or operate...” a broadcast station. Furthermore, it is worth noting that twenty and three years later, that seed manifested in the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, NBC Decree 38 of 1992. Before that year, all legal and constitutional instruments in force in the country effectively made broadcasting an exclusive preserve of the Federal and State Governments. However, when it was promulgated on 24th August 1992, the Decree established the National Broadcasting Commission, NBC, and empowered it to accept and screen applications for the issuance of licenses for private participation in broadcasting in the country. The commission was also mandated to renew and revoke licenses where and when it deems fit, and also to generally monitor and regulate broadcasting in Nigeria. In 1994, the commission granted the first set of licenses to some firms and individuals. But private broadcasting operations per se started two years later in 1996 with the emergence of Clapper Board Television on Channel 45 UHF. Later that same year, Ray Power, the first private radio, began broadcasting on 100.5 mega hertz on the frequency modulation band.

Since the debut of the first private television and radio stations, the number of broadcast stations in the country has risen to over 500, according to Dr. Silas Yisa, the director-general of the NBC. However, government ownership is still dominant in the broadcast industry in Nigeria, notwithstanding the onset of liberalization. But irrespective of ownership, there is no gainsaying the fact that liberalization has catalyzed an unprecedented level of proliferation of broadcast stations in Nigeria. A casual comparison of the pre-liberalization and post-liberalization figures of the number of broadcast stations in the country, which is outside the goal of this paper, would drive this point home (see Akinfeleye, 2003). Away from the issue about ownership patterns and figures, one may now ask: are there observable effects of liberalization of broadcasting in Nigeria with its attendant level of proliferation of stations?

The Gains of Liberalisation

One of the most visible effects of liberalization and proliferation of broadcasting houses in Nigeria is *wider latitude in programming*. In broadcasting parlance, programming is the process of determining and scheduling the contents of broadcast operations. In other words, programming is the planning and execution of what radio listeners would hear, and what television viewers would see on their sets in a predetermined order. Programming addresses the issue of what would be on air, when, and for how long? Clearly, the contents of radio and television broadcast signals have increased in terms of varieties and durations since the advent of liberalization. Another visible gain of liberalization is a *higher altitude in creativity*. In this context, creativity is the ability of broadcast media stakeholders to do old things in new and interesting ways. It also means the ability to find new and interesting things to do in the same old fashioned ways. Thus, it can be observed that liberalization of broadcasting has taken creativity beyond the limits imposed by the monopolization era. For instance, the Nigerian Television Authority has decentralized its news operations. No longer do we listen to two boring newscasters for 45 minute telecast. What obtains now is a dynamic, hour long presentation of an array of newscasters and reporters spread across various centers in the country. *Longer operation hours* are now the vogue. Gone are those days when government owned television stations open at 16:00 hours and close at 23:55 hours after *newscap*. Similarly, government owned radio stations, in the main, no longer commence broadcasting from 05:30 hours to shut down at midnight after news summary. Furthermore, some government owned broadcast stations are towing the lines of some private broadcast stations which operate round the clock. This means that an insomniac need not suffer boredom as well because there is a wide array of programmes to watch or listen to on various stations. Similarly, travelers or workers on night shifts no longer have to contend

with loneliness or monotony as there are many available disc jockeys on various stations to keep them company. *Increased job opportunities* are inadvertent fall outs of wider latitude in programming, higher altitude in creativity, and longer operating hours. For instance, it would take more than a superman to be on broadcast duties 24 hours per day, and seven days per week. Similarly, it would take more than a superwoman to cover all beats all the time. The point here is simply this: more hands would be needed to keep the increasing number of broadcast stations on air, and this translates to more job opportunities. Liberalization has also broadened the prospects of *job satisfaction*. For instance, broadcasters in the current liberalization era appear to have more leeway for dynamism, self expression, and use of initiative than in the monopolization era. It is common to see or hear broadcasters exchange banter before, during and after presenting programmes, including very formal ones like newscasts. It is also common for broadcasters to go ad libitum far more often than before. This can only mean one thing: increased job satisfaction. Furthermore, liberalization has also enhanced *professionalism*. To succeed both as a business and a social institution broadcast stations must attract and retain massive acceptance among viewers and listeners, otherwise advertisers, who contribute immensely to their revenue base would ignore such stations. As Salihu (2004:17) had observed

The challenges of management of broadcasting stations include finding the right caliber of staff who can deliver on the mission and the vision of the station. Since the inception of the NBC, followed by the subsequent increase and geometric multiplication of stations in Nigeria, the pace of training of required manpower to man the stations has not been able to catch up with the rate of increase in the number of stations.

Therefore, it behoves such broadcast stations to employ the best of available hands. And to be employable and retainable, employee and potential employees of broadcast stations have no option than to strive for and to operate at the highest level of professionalism. Viewed from another perspective, liberalization would be seen to have *broadened the public arena* which elsewhere, this writer had described as “a venue of convergence for societal discourse” and which today, “is more of a psychological space than a geographic location” (Oketunmbi, 2005:47). Thus, by creating an atmosphere that is conducive for proliferation of broadcast media, liberalization has decentralized and broadened the broadcast media and has thereby provided a higher capacity venue for participation in public discourse.

Meanwhile, the consensus that freedom of expression is a hallmark of modern democracy is common knowledge. And by extending the public arena beyond the confines of the monopolization era, liberalization has created more

chances for various stakeholders in the society to express themselves. In other words, liberalization has *enhanced the practice of democratic ideal of freedom of expression*.

Another visible gain of liberalization is the *expansion of the audience/viewers' options* in terms of choice of stations and programmes. Gone are those relay re-diffusion days of the British Empire Broadcasting Service when listeners could only turn their pseudo radio sets “on” or “off”, or their volume “up” or “down”. Gone also are those days when government owned stations served the audience with obvious lies, half truths, and uninspiring programmes. Now however, and due to the fact that government owned stations are aware of the options that are open to the public, they often beg: “please don’t touch that dial” or “keep the dial locked on station so and so”, etc.

Furthermore, the fallout of the expansion of audience /viewers options is a *healthy intra-industrial rivalry*. Gone are those monopolization days when governments, due to lack of competition, force issues and conclusions into the minds of susceptible audience, in line with Anthonio Gramsci’s theory of mass media hegemony which essentially posits that “he who pays the piper dictates the tune” (Oketunmbi, 2004:6), and in line with the agenda setting theory which fundamentally avers that there is “... a correspondence between the order of importance given in the media to ‘issues’ and the order of significance attached to the same issues by the public...” (McQuail, 1987:275). But contrary to Cohen’s assertion that “the press may not be particularly successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963 cited in Okigbo, 1990:345). But now, due to the competition that arrived in the wake of liberalization, broadcast stations now strive to outdo one another in the quest for the audience attention. This reality can only raise the stakes in the earlier mentioned parameters: professionalism, creativity, programming, operation hours, audience choices, expansion of the public arena, etc. Liberalization also sounded the death knell of one sided information and propaganda by providing, as direct consequence of proliferation of broadcast stations, means of opposition megaphone. The opposition no longer has to watch helplessly by the sidelines as governments monopolize and manipulate public broadcast stations to the detriment of the opposition. Now, thanks to liberalization, the opposition has a wide array of alternative broadcast stations to launch or express its views.

Finally, it is also glaring that liberalization has brought specialization in its wake, both in absolute and in limited terms. For instance, four non-governmental bodies had been issued with various licenses for specialized broadcasting in Nigeria (Akinfeleye, 2003:45).

These include Brila Broadcasting Services, owner of Brila 88.9 FM which specialize in sports and music, and the Department of Mass communication, University of Lagos which was licensed to operate Unilag FM for educational and academic programmes. Others are Atlantic FM for French programmes, and Spectrum FM for hard news.

Furthermore, there are now limited specialists in the Nigerian broadcast industry in terms of the overall tilt of programming. For instance, while some television stations are famous for entertainment programmes such as movies, others are popular for incisive news and political analysis. But since the objective of this paper does not include holding brief for any station, no instance is mentioned.

Pains of Liberalisation

On the other hand, there are some attendant disadvantages in the wake of liberalization. The most visible ones include the followings:

Due to proliferation of broadcast stations, there is a highly conspicuous phenomenon of *signals interference, overlap and jamming*, despite the fact that “deviation from assigned frequency” is the second of “three most serious offences against the Nigerian Broadcasting Code” (Salihu, 2004:17).

Either deliberately or inadvertently, some broadcast stations do not restrict their broadcast signals to the frequencies allocated to them. Thus, for instance, a hypothetical broadcast station, say Radio ABC, licensed to broadcast on say xy.5 mega hertz on the frequency modulation band would sometimes be received with varying degrees of clarity on the frequencies xy.1 to 4, and xy.6 to 9, etc. the effect of this trend is that Radio ABC would intermittently interfere with the signals of other radio stations on a given frequency range, either by overlapping or jamming other stations’ signals, such that listeners at home would either receive two stations on one frequency, or receive Radio ABC on the frequency allocated to another station. This problem is so persistent that the reader would find out that even the use of hypersensitive digital radio receivers cannot solve the problem. Closely related to the attendant proliferation of broadcast stations in the wake of liberalization in Nigeria is the issue of monitoring which has indeed become a Herculean task to NBC.

Salihu (2004:15) underscored this problem when he observed that: “the broadcasting firmament is all but a babel now, particularly in the metropolitan centers. Lagos alone has a constellation of 33 radio and television stations... five privately owned Multipoint Microwave Distribution Systems... and one Direct Satellite Television, which, altogether, offer 55 channels to the public.” This, according to him, means that “...in Lagos alone, about 2,112 hours of broadcasting takes place every 24hours. To continuously monitor all channels therefore, you

would need in one day 264 officers running an eight hour shift each. It also translates into 88 monitoring points with the full complement of appropriate gadgetry.” When these figures are factored into the 36 states of the federation and its capital city, Abuja, some of which are close to Lagos in the number of operating stations, one would get an idea of the formidable task before the NBC in terms of monitoring.

Another noticeable problem of liberalization is *audience confusion and apathy*. For instance, due to a wide range of available options in terms of stations and programmes, members of the audience may be in the psychological trauma of indecision owing to the desirability of every option. Similarly, the incidence of signal overlapping and jamming as discussed earlier, may lead to irritation on the part of the audience. In both instances the average listener or viewer might become confused and apathetic to any station. Instead, he might switch off his set and his attention to other matters.

Commercialization of news is another pain of liberalization. Virtually all private broadcast stations in the country were established along business lines. And in order to maximize their chances of profit, these private stations commercialize news that should ordinarily be covered under public service considerations. *Unhealthy intra and inter media conglomerate rivalry* is another irksome fallout of liberalization. This refers to unhealthy competition within or between media conglomerates. A media conglomerate is simply one that owns two or more mass media. Thus a conglomerate that owns two radio stations and which operates the two stations on the same band, (e.g. fm) and within the same location (e.g. Lagos) essentially competes against itself for the listenership of the same public, except if the programmes and language of the two stations are generally and specifically different. At the inter conglomerate rivalry level, stations make categorical and sometimes false claims that are not backed by facts. Thus, one station might claim to be the “first on the dial” while there are other stations before it on the spectrum. Similarly, another station would claim to be “the station other stations listen to” without supplying research based statistics to buttress its claims.

There is no gainsaying the fact that liberalization has *widened the avenue for cultural imperialism*. During the era of government monopolization of the broadcast industry, profit motive was not a major factor in programming. But in this era of liberalization, the case is reversed. Thus, powered by the profit motive, private broadcast stations invest more in programmes that people *want* rather than what they *need*. Thus, entertainment programmes in the form of foreign musicals and foreign movies rule the air waves despite NBC’s ratio of 60-40 foreign to local prescription for programming. And anyway, since there are now more stations, that automatically translates into more quantity of a programme genre across the

stations, anyone hooked on foreign movies, for instance, only has to change channels to gratify his taste for foreign culture programmes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In spite of the obviously inadvertent negative effects of liberalization on the society, accommodation of private participation in broadcasting in Nigeria has brought immense benefits to society in terms of quality, professionalism, and enhancement of democracy. Kudos should therefore be given to the originators of the relevant section of the 1979 constitution, and to the brains behind the conception and implementation of NBC decree 38 of 1992.

But how should the Nigerian society address the ills of liberalization? The starting point is that NBC should not rest on its oars. Rather, it should diligently step up its efforts at discharging its statutory role of monitoring broadcasting in the country in order to enforce standards. For instance, NBC should monitor stations and ensure they restrict their signals to allotted frequencies.

Furthermore, broadcast stations should voluntarily de-emphasize entertainment in their programming. Rather, they should step up the education and information contents of their programming. After all, is it not said that all play and no work makes Jag Rag a ragged jackass?

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