


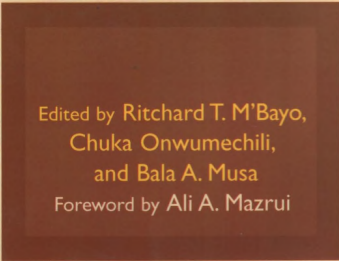
Communication in an Era of Global Conflicts

Principles and Strategies for
21st Century Africa



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CONTENT

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
PART I: THEORIES OF CONFLICT	1
1. Attribution, Psychodynamics and Communication Behaviors of Conflict Actors <i>Ritchard T. M'Bayo</i>	3
2. Media Messages, Sins of Distortion and Signs of Wisdom <i>Ali A. Mazrui</i>	15
3. Agenda-Setting, African Media and Conflict <i>Eronini R. Megwa</i>	25
4. Framing Theory and Conflict Transformation in Rwanda and Bosnia <i>Bala A. Musa</i>	49
PART II: SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICT	73
5. Professional and Organizational Influences on Conflict Reporting <i>Ritchard T. M'Bayo</i>	75
6. Media Messages, the Academy and the Internet <i>Ali A. Mazrui</i>	93
7. Global Media and Changing News Practices <i>Mohammed Musa</i>	111
8. Conflict, Globalization, and the New World Information and Communication Order <i>Nosa Owens-Ibie and Abigail O. Ogwezzy</i>	133
9. Threat Perceptions and Security in the West African Sub-region <i>Joses Gani Yoroms</i>	151

10.	Virtual Communication and the Role of Diasporic Communities in Conflict Mediation <i>Bala A. Musa</i>	161
PART III: CONFLICT STRATEGIES		179
11.	Harnessing the Power of African Traditional and Modern Media Systems to Avert Conflicts in Africa <i>Ritchard T. M'Bayo, Kehbama Langmia, Oloruntola Sunday & Ifeoma Amobi</i>	181
12.	Conflict Resolution in African Folklore <i>Christine Oduor-Ombaka</i>	199
13.	The Press as Tools and Casualties of Political Conflicts in Nigeria <i>Abiodun Salawu and Sola Isola</i>	221
14.	Mass Media and the Establishment of Peace as Path to Sustainable Development in Africa <i>Matt Moge kwu</i>	235
PART IV: AFRICA IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL CONFLICTS		251
15.	Mass Media and Ethnic Conflict in West Africa <i>Emeka J. Okoli</i>	253
16.	Social Conflict, Communication and Youth in Tanzania <i>Nicholls K. Boas</i>	263
17.	Negotiating the Thorny Road of Conflict as Nigeria Opens its Communications Market to Private interests <i>Chuka Onwumechili</i>	279
18.	Global Media and the Replication of international Conflicts in Northern Nigeria <i>Ogu Sunny Enemaku</i>	295

19.	Conflict and Ferment in International Communication <i>Ephraim A. Okoro</i>	309
20.	Multinational Corporations, Community Relations and the Niger Delta Conflict <i>Abigail O. Ogwezzu</i>	317
21.	Poverty, Professionalism and the Challenges of Democratization among Conflicted Print Media Journalists in Nigeria <i>Nosa Owens-Ibie</i>	329
22.	Language of Conflict and the Coverage of Global Terrorism in Kenyan Mass Media 1998-2005 <i>Benson Oduor Ojwang'</i>	349
23.	Managing Conflict in Nigeria through Television <i>Olufemi Onabajo</i>	371
	Index	381
	About the Contributors	387

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Chapter 13

The Press as Tools and Casualties of Political Conflicts in Nigeria

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Introduction

In addition to playing the role of a watch-dog against the excesses of the ruling class and assisting in setting agenda for good governance, the media also provides the platform for political actors to exchange rhetorical assaults whenever they are in conflict. Beyond playing the role of chronicler of those conflicts, the media invariably get dragged into these conflicts and in the process often lose their status as a veritable and an unbiased public institution. This trend was evident in most of the 19th and early 20th centuries which were the political budding years, when Nigeria experienced various kinds of political systems including colonialism, 'militocracy', and democracy.

This experience has adversely affected the media, constituting a serious limitation to its journey toward professionalism. Often, because of involvement in political conflicts, the press lost credibility at various times, lost its freedom and the right to publish at other times and most importantly lost skilled personnel to other lucrative sectors of the economy. Consequently, even though journalism is among the earliest professions in Nigeria, it tends to be the least in terms of possession of ingredients of professionalism. This situation cannot be

separated from social, political and economic crises witnessed in the polity at one time or the other.

This chapter attempts to explore the historical antecedents of the Nigerian press and its involvement in political and social conflicts which have limited its performance. Recommendations are made on ways by which the press could emerge stronger to contribute positively to political development, peace building and conflict reduction in Nigeria in the 21st century.

A Review of Literature: Mass media and conflict

Tichenor *et al* (1980, p. 17) note that social conflict is a principal ingredient of much newspaper content since conflict is a central component in community life and social change. Tehranian (1996, p. 3) explains this further by saying that the media are naturally attracted to conflict. He elaborates: "conflict is the bread and butter of journalism Conflict sells" (p. 3). Arno *et al.* (1984, p. 2) assert: "I would go so far to assert that news is defined by its conflict focus and that there is nothing deplorable about the fact."

The media is justified in reporting conflicts because it has the responsibility of recording events as they unfold, part of which is conflict. In other words, conflict is a part of reality and the media has the task of portraying reality. In fact, the provision of information about conflict in the media is a step towards resolution. Tichenor *et al.* (1980, p. 2) provides an insight:

There is the traditional viewpoint that resolution of social problems is related to inputs of information. Accordingly, if a system is sufficiently saturated with information, a general understanding of the topic will develop within the system. Once understanding is at hand, resolution is assumed to be at hand.

Viewed differently, newspapers' and other media's reports of conflict are said to be contributory to the legitimating of the conflict (Nnaemeka, 1996). Olorunyomi (2000, p. 5), with background knowledge of the genocide in Rwanda, further, contends that the media can act as an accomplice to genocide not only through its indifference but also through active collaboration. He asserts: "In every communal or ethnic conflict, the positions of the media can significantly impact the outcome".

Olorunyomi (2000, p. 7) again notes that the problem associated with media coverage of diversity or conflict is not normative, but rather ontological. He argues:

To isolate the problems associated with covering diversity as simple matters of norms is to suggest that only endogenous factors influence the practice of the media. The fact of diversity in concrete editorial terms always assumes a plu-

Africa, Europe and America then. In strongly worded editorials, the paper spoke against illicit trade in slavery, which was still going on in some part of the West African coast and other inhuman treatments of people engaged in by both Europeans and the local people. This hit the right chord among the local readers who perceived the paper as fighting for a cause that could lead to eradication of a malaise which was then seen as truncating the development of humanity. In strongly worded editorials, the paper campaigned strongly against illicit slavery which was still going on in some part of West Africa.

Next, *Iwe Irohin* went into the economic terrain where it reported news about produce trades, movement of goods and merchant ships from Europe to West Africa, prices of commodities and even carried advertisements of products and businesses that could strengthen interactions between Africans and Europeans who by then had already established trading posts in the West African coasts and were moving into the hinterland to engage in trading with the local people. This plunge also hit the right chord among the local people and it further boosted the popularity of *Iwe Irohin*. However, the newspaper began to criticize the unfair trading practices being engaged in by the European business community at the detriment of the local people. This drew the attention of the British crown governor, who was in charge of the colony of Lagos which was close to Abeokuta. At first, Rev Townsend received a mild warning from the governor and was advised to tone down the extent of his criticism of these negative trade practices. It was recorded that later, Rev. Townsend was actually invited over to London for a sterner warning because of his obduracy. This was also good enough for the readers of *Iwe Irohin* and the newspaper's credibility actually shot up, even though by then, the colonial administration's mandate was restricted only to Lagos and *Iwe Irohin* was actually operating away from this territory. Only its influence and readership was spreading to Lagos, and so there was nothing the crown governor could do in terms of censoring the contents or restricting the newspaper's reach.

Iwe Irohin's death knell was however sounded when it dabbled into the local political conflicts between the Egba and the Ibadan people, arising from a disputation over the control of the trading routes which linked the two territories with Lagos. This kind of civil conflicts was common in the Yorubaland at that period. The recurrent bloody tribal wars were actually one of the reasons adduced by the British for extending their colonial mandate to the Yoruba hinterland in order to curb the prevalent internecine bloody encounters among the Yoruba. The newspaper was accused by the Egba, who were hosting the newspaper, of taking side with their enemy in that conflict. As a result, the offices and printing press of the newspaper were sacked and vandalized and the publisher, Rev. Townsend fled *Egbland*. Although the newspaper was said to have been revived after the crises, it never remained as it was originally. The closure of *Iwe Irohin* meant loss of livelihood to its publisher, workers and numerous

others who benefited from the operations of the newspaper. This event signified the beginning of a trend in journalism in Nigeria which had extended into the contemporary times.

The press is an important ingredient in the democratic governance process, and, as such, has the responsibility of mediating between the rulers and the governed (Habermas, 1989)². Essentially, it should be the watchdog against the excesses of the ruling class and must often be seen to be championing the good of all in an unbiased way. Also the press must learn the skill of balancing acts in political conflicts and in contestation for power and resources, in order not to lose the reputation of being an unbiased umpire in the political environment. This unfortunately is a lesson the Nigerian press failed to learn and which has remained an albatross to the development of the press up until the present time.

The colonial period in Nigeria marked another phase during which the press, though was very active in the political environment, witnessed a lot of stunted growth. Between 1880 and 1837, about 81 newspaper titles were established in Nigeria (Idowu, 2001). Most of these did not survive for long due mainly to hostile political and economic operating environment. However, the few who survived for a while made marks in the socio political terrain. Most prominent among these was the *Lagos Weekly Record* published by John Payne Jackson, who later handed the publication to his son, Thomas Horatio Jackson (Omu, 1965). The paper was very powerful since its inception in 1890 until 1930 when it ceased publishing³. It came into being before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Nigeria, which took place in 1914, and played prominent role in the early resistance against colonialism, including the British colonial policies in its various protectorates in West Africa. The then governor of Northern region, Lord Lugard, who effected the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Nigeria, received a lot of bashes from the *Weekly Record* for his atrocious administrative style.

The activism of *Lagos Weekly Record* led to the promulgation of the first press gagging law in Nigeria - the Seditious Offences Ordinance of 1909. The editor of the *Weekly Record* was the first victim of the law and he was jailed as a result of his criticism of some of the colonial administration policies. When the paper remained adamant and refused to soften its hard stance on public matters, the colonial government ordered the stoppage of all its foreign advertisement subscriptions which put the publication into a precarious economic situation. Although it survived this siege, it never had it smooth again. It however became the nursery for breeding radical and fearless tribe of journalists in Nigeria.

In the twilight years of the *Lagos Weekly Record*, another vibrant newspaper, the *Daily News*, owned and managed by the leading nationalist, Herbert Macaulay, emerged. *Daily News* became instantly famous for its vehement opposition to the various colonial constitutions and policies. *The Lagos Times* was another newspaper that was very significant among the militant and nationalistic

press in Nigeria. Uche (1989, p. 93) recorded that the newspaper started the first pitched press war between the Nigerian nationalists fighting for independence and the British colonial administrators when it editorialized:

We are not clamoring for immediate independence...but it should always be borne in mind that the present order of things will not last forever. A time will come when the colonies on the West Coast will be left to regulate their own internal and external affairs (cf. Coker, 1968, p. 32).

The arrival of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe's *West African Pilot* boosted this agitation. Young Azikiwe, who was educated in America, brought in new savvy to the practice of journalism because of his exposure to the ideals of liberal democracy in the west. The publication met, almost instantly, serious opposition from the government, who put several hurdles in place for the paper. It was required to provide sureties to stand for the renewal of its registration, which most of the educated elites were not ready to do because of obvious risks. At a time, the paper was prevented from remitting required funds overseas for subscription to foreign wire services, which was an important content source for the paper. The doggedness and determination of Azikiwe was the only reason why the newspaper operated successfully in that era and motivated other papers to go along in spite of the hostilities in the operating environment.

The Nigerian Media and the Nation's Civil War

Perhaps, the greatest siege against the press in Nigeria was the emergence of regional and partisan press, which came about shortly before political independence. It is however important to note that regionalization or tribalism was not peculiar to the press. The broadcast media in Nigeria were also actively involved. It is also instructive to note that the mass media abstracted from the nature of the formation and the structure of the nation's political parties. The mass media were regionally or tribally based. The result, according to Uche (1989: xviii) was that the mass media of the regions became the megaphones of political interest articulation of each of the regions within the federation. This pattern of mass media structure and control constituted a breeding ground for political irresponsibility that inevitably culminated in ghastly national accidents (coups and a civil war). As already indicated, the tribally-based politics of the country did not leave the press untouched. This tribal orientation of the press contributed, in no small way, to the outbreak of the nation's civil war of 1967 to 1970. Each of the former regions of the country had its own press, and all the media joined their regional governments to engage in bitter political polemics (Uche, 1989, p. xxi). As an illustration, Uche recalled a story dispatched from Lagos by

a foreign correspondent about the terrible crisis that characterized the 1964 general elections in the Western Region of Nigeria:

In the populous Eastern Region, whose political powers are aligned with the opposition Action Group in the West, key city councils adopted ordinances banning papers that stayed neutral or actively backed the Western Government's return to power.

This group includes the Federal Government-owned *Morning Post*, the Western Government-owned *Daily Sketch* and the independent *Daily Express* and the *Daily Times*—Nigeria's most widely read paper. The net effect of the ordinances has been to block the entrance of these papers into the Eastern Region by either air or road.

In retaliation, city councils in the West have made it a crime not only to read pro-opposition *Pilot*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Tribune* but also to tune in the Eastern Region radio. If caught errant newspaper readers and radio listeners are subject to a year's imprisonment. The East has imposed no such penalties. But purple-uniformed political thugs have set up road blocks, searched cars for the "wrong" papers, and beaten the occupants who possessed them (cf. *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1965).

Similarly, the following discussions that took place among a former Nigerian military head of state, Yakubu Gowon, the former Igbo (Biafran) leader, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, and some other Nigerian military leaders at Aburi, Ghana, during a conference held to nip the then impending civil war in the bud illustrate the implications of the regionalization of the media and terrible performance of the press during those crisis periods (Uche, 1989, pp. 99 - 100):

Lt.-Col. Gowon: On the Government Information Media I think all the Government Information Media in the country have done terribly bad (sic). Emeka would say the *New Nigerian* has been very unkind to the East.

Lt. Col. Ojukwu: And the *Post* which I pay for.

Lt. Col. Gowon: Sometimes I feel my problem is not with anyone but the *Outlook*.

Lt. Col. Ojukwu: All the other information media have done a lot. When the Information Media in a country completely closed their eyes to what was happening, I think it is a dangerous thing.

Major Johnson: Let us agree it is the situation.

Lt. Col. Ejoor: All of them have committed one crime or the other.

Lt. Col. Hassan: The *Outlook* is the worst of them.

Lt. Col. Ojukwu: The *Outlook* is not the worst, the *Post* which we all in fact pay for is the worst followed closely by the *New Nigerian*.

Mr. T. Omo-Bare: Let us make a general statement on all of them, no distinction.

Lt. Col. Gowon: I think we agreed that all Government Information Media should desist from making inflammatory publications that would worsen the situation in the country (cf. John de St. Jore, 1972, p. 345).

Parochialism and Partisanship in the Nigerian Press

The establishment of *Nigerian Tribune* also invigorated the tribal press war (Omu, 1996). The paper was established by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a leading political figure and leader of the Action Group party, which had its stronghold in the South West of Nigeria. The paper was actually established to champion the sectional interests of the Yoruba ethnic group in the political terrain and it never hides its mission. This caused immense devastation to the nationalist posture of press struggle and brought ethnic coloration to the political struggle⁴. This trend became a cankerworm which has defied solution in the Nigerian political terrain till date. Other regions of the country where various political parties held sway followed on the example of the Action Group party of the western region by starting their various regional newspapers. At the commencement of self rule in the country, electronic media came into the scene and again, the western regional government blazed the trail by establishing the first television station. A radio station had earlier been established by the federal government under the National Broadcasting Service, though. By independence, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe's *West African Pilot* had been turned into a megaphone of his National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) political party, another regional party with a strong hold in the East.

The first real attempt by government to venture into owning and running a newspaper was the establishment of *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* by the government of the Northern region. This paper was established in 1937 mainly to counter the influence of the Southern newspapers among citizens of Northern Nigeria. Government ownership eventually bloomed after independence as a result of divisions in the political ranks in the various regions which led to the establishment of *Sketch* in the West, *Daily Star* in the East and *New Nigeria* in the North. A former editor of the *New Nigerian* was reported to have said that the Northern government found it necessary to establish the newspaper to (i) get across the views of the Northern elite and mobilize them in order to achieve its goals; (ii) fight the Northern case in all disputes at the centre (Daura, 1971, pp. 39-40).

The attainment of the nation's independence in 1960 did not change the character of the press. Even the Federal Government-owned press, the *Morning Post* was not immune to the pursuit of tribal and sectional interest in preference to the goal of national unity, identity and integration. It was this parochialism that led to the death of the *Post* (in early 1973). Uche (1989, p. 99) recalled that the *Post* 'died' because it took its audience for a ride. It failed to recognize that it had a nationally-based audience..." The only newspaper which was neutral and most prosperous after independence was the privately owned *Daily Times*. There was a semblance of professionalism in the *Daily Times* for its neutrality, which enabled journalists within the organization to build careers. However, the acquisition of *Daily Times* years later by the federal military government led to the gradual decline of the organization. Uche (1989, p. 101) remarked that the *Times*, over the years, had grown to be the largest circulating newspaper in Nigeria due to its neutrality and non-allegiance to any political party until during the Second Republic when the Shagari administration converted it into a party propaganda organ. Presently, even when the organization has been privatized, it is still grappling to survive.

It is remarkable to note that the only visible trampling on the press freedom in the post-independence first republic was the restrictions imposed on certain newspapers with political bias from circulating in certain regions by the regional governments. Notable among this was the limitation imposed on *Nigerian Tribune* from circulating in certain parts of the Northern region and similar retaliatory policies by other regional governments against newspapers perceived as being in the opposition. The greatest siege against the press came during the long military dictatorships in Nigeria which spanned about 28 years. From the first to the last of the various military regimes, the press witnessed arrests, incarcerations, jailing and killing of journalists, promulgation of obnoxious press decrees, banning and unbanning of news media organizations, forced and voluntary exile of journalists⁵. In all of these incidences promising careers were stunted in the press, people became jobless and promising brains were lost to other professions. Compared to other sectors of the Nigerian economy, the media sector attracted the least investment during this period for reasons of insecurity of investments.

Significantly, the press got itself heavily involved in the politics of the Nigeria's Second Republic. It was both a tool and an important casualty of the political conflict of the period. The *National Concord*, founded on March 1, 1980, by a Nigerian multi-millionaire and chairman of the powerful American ITT for the Middle-East and African zone, had an influential impact on the nation's politics of the time. Uche (1989, p. 103) noted that the *National Concord* came to existence in order to protect the political interests of the then ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) as well as to disseminate the ideals of the party, NPN, in a most convincing manner. Its founding followed the controversy, antagonism

and bitterness the 1979 general elections had generated. The emergence of the *National Concord* added greater confusion to Nigeria's political intrigues.

In furtherance of his political ambition within the ruling NPN, the *Concord's* publisher, late Chief M.K.O. Abiola, launched a virulent attack with his newspaper reports and editorials on the leader of the opposition party, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), late Chief Obafemi Awolowo who happened to hail from the same region with him. Among other things, the newspaper exposed Awolowo's acquisition of 360 plots of land from some peasants in the reservation areas of Maroko village of Lagos at a paltry price of \$1.5 million. For this stance of the newspaper, its patronage in the Southwestern part of Nigeria, the region both the publisher and Chief Awolowo belonged to, was very low. This was because of the larger-than-life image of Awolowo in the region. This response to the newspaper in the region meant a financial loss to the newspaper as the region is home the highest percentage of the literate population in the country. Yet, the newspaper was undaunted as its wealthy publisher continued to fund it and, thus, continued the pursuit of its political ambition.

The story however changed when the newspaper did not succeed in realizing his ambition of being the NPN's presidential candidate in 1983. In reaction, he quit NPN and formal politicking, but the newspaper continued to dabble into political frays. One important feature of the newspaper after the quitting of the NPN by its publisher was to make u-turn in its political stance. It started supporting the presidential candidature of the erstwhile enemy of his publisher, Chief Awolowo while also attacking the incumbent president of Nigeria, and the renominated presidential candidate of NPN, Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Uche (1989, p. 106) noted:

The credibility of the *National Concord* as an authoritative, respectable and non-tribal newspaper began to erode when it made a surprising U-turn to support the presidential candidature of Awolowo whom it had set out to discredit and destroy politically...

At the time of this political switch-over of the *National Concord*, some political thugs were suspected to have set ablaze the newspaper's house that housed its newsprints. The general belief was that some politicians who were being frustrated by *Concord's* editorials and news coverage, decided to burn down the entire newsprints so that the newspaper would have nothing to print on as the NPN central government would not grant it import licence to enable it place orders for newsprints (Uche, 1989, p. 108).

The newspaper was also faced with another challenge when it dabbled into religious controversy occasioned by the then proposed Nigeria's membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). For the fact that its publisher was a Muslim, the newspaper stoutly campaigned for the nation's membership of the

organization; and in the process shutting out the Christian opposition views expressed in both editorial and advertorial forms. The Christian community reacted to this stance of the newspaper by stopping to read and patronize it.

A number of other newspapers established for political reasons in the Nigeria's second republic (1979-1983) entered the political frays and became a casualty, especially after the termination of the republic in 1983 through a military putsch. Such newspapers included *Advocate*, founded by the national chairman of the National Party of Nigeria, Chief Adisa Akinloye; *People's Voice*, founded by Niyi Oniororo; and *Broom*, founded by Godwin Daboh.

The Court's Bard and the Crusading Press

Some other newspapers suffered the problem of credibility, and thus were shunned by the public because of their publishers' involvement with unpopular governments, and the newspapers' stance on political issues. Such included *Third Eye*, whose publisher was known to be a contractor of the Ibrahim Babangida military government (that annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential election, widely adjudged to be free and fair), and *Monitor*, founded by another contractor, this time of the General Sani Abacha government, and a military apologist.

Yet, there were other newspapers that just emerged to join a political fray for crusading purpose. That was actually the case with many publications that emerged between 1993 and 1994 in pursuit of the struggle for the actualization of the presidential mandate of Chief M.K.O Abiola, the man widely believed to have won the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential election. Abiola's *Concord* group of newspapers was finally suffocated out of circulation by the Sani Abacha military junta during the struggle for June 12. Some other media houses suffered the punishment of closure for different lengths of time during the June 12 crisis as they were regarded by the junta as the opposition media. Such included *Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Sketch*, *Tribune*, and Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation (now known as Gateway Radio and Television).

Individual journalists also suffered various fates in the hands of the junta. Some were killed, some jailed, some detained, some hounded into exiles, while some even had their pregnant wives detained in place of unreachable husbands.

The press is much freer in the current democratic political dispensation. However, investment in the media is still very low compared with other sectors and this has been adduced to the concentration of the media contents only on political issues. However, there tends to be a constant struggle between the press and politicians in which the press appears to be the ultimate loser. Politicians often court members of the media whenever they are struggling to gain power or get into political offices. During this time, they describe the press as partners in progress. However, as soon as they get into office, they begin to cast suspicious look at the press and there are often temptations to trample on press freedom.

While the media would insist on performing the role of watch dog against the excesses of the ruling class, politicians often view the press as a distraction, which has to be tackled in order to progress. It then becomes a cat and dog fight. Because of this close interlink with politics and constant intervention in political conflicts, the media sector, has attracted the least investment and syndicated funds among all sectors of the economy since the commencement of the present dispensation in 1999. Judging by investment into the communication, banking and oil sectors for instance, investment into the media had been poor. No newspaper or broadcasting organization is currently listed on the Nigerian stock exchange; they only report the activities there. That accounts for the reasons why the media is witnessing perhaps the highest turnover of staff, constantly loosing its personnel to other sectors of the economy as public relations and information officers.

This trend has also posed big ethical challenges to journalists who continue to operate in the same environment with other professionals who earn better income and enjoy better career prospects. There are constant temptations to compromise and sell their conscience for material gains. Without trying to excuse the journalist for flouting professional ethics especially as regards the issues of reward and financial matters, the economic challenges of practicing as a journalist in Nigeria is so overwhelming that it is only the strong willed individuals who are determined to make a semblance of career in the media that remains in the same media organization for upward of 5 years. Others are lost into politics and other economic endeavors. This hampers the quality of media output and instigates low patronage from the public. The total circulation figure of about 50 national and regional dailies circulating in Nigeria is less than 200,000 copies – in a population of over 120 million with about 65% literacy rate!

Conclusion

One way the press can establish professionalism and ascertain its future in Nigeria is to develop a sound business model. This requires that it frees itself from political entanglements and serve as a purely unbiased umpire of political events. By identifying the salient interests of the audience and catering to those interests outside of politics, the press would occupy an enviable place in the polity. In order to succeed, a newspaper needs to be guided by a clear vision and focused editorial policy. In addition, such press establishment must be committed to management methods that are clearly and entirely professional and adopt the best practices in enduring democracies across the world.

A trace of these elements is already emerging among the newspapers that have maintained neutrality in the political arena. They are the ones being patronized the most by advertisers and whose circulation has been consistent. They

are the ones that attract and sustain good quality professionals over a fairly longer period and whose objectivity has been unquestionable in the present democratic dispensation. They could serve as the model for a future press for Nigeria.

Notes

1. See the account of the establishment of the newspaper in Nigeria, its purpose and operations in Duyile (1987) and Omu (1965).
2. Habermas (1989) explained the role of the press as a public sphere, but also argued that such role is being eroded by the culture of consumerism.
3. Omu (1965) provides a more detailed account of the activities of The Jacksons in the journalism scene during the colonial era, the difficulties they faced and the impacts they made in opposing the policies of the colonial administration in Nigeria.
4. Omu (1996) provides an incisive explanation of the ethnic and political rivalry which brought about division in the rank of newspaper owners and prevented the press from adequately preparing the people for the challenges of independence during this period.
5. The accounts of the repression of the press during the military regimes in Nigeria is provided in more detail by Lanre Idowu's article, 'Path to Sustainable Greatness', in 2001 edition of *Media World Yearbook*.

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