

Political Economy of COVID-19 and the Implication on Media Management and Sustainability in Nigeria



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Abstract This study investigates the political economy of government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and its implications for media management and survival. It is a qualitative research that relies on primary and secondary sources for data gathering. The study discovers that the ungainly and discriminatory political economy of the Nigerian government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is unfriendly to the media as it is isolated and made the media operating environment unfavorable for growth and sustainability. The study also reveals that the past business model where the media render service before being paid and disseminate news content in hard copy while relying on old news consumers can no longer suffice during the COVID-19 era. Conclusively, the study highlights some coping strategies for media managers which include pulling resources together as through a consortium, merger, and acquisition of outfits with similar editorial focus, raising funds from the stock market, changing the business model of service before pay and digitization of contents. The study recommends that the Nigerian government in conjunction with the international development agencies should launch a media recovery plan (MRP) as was done in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and France to stabilize the industry and reposition it to fulfill its statutory roles in national development.

Keywords COVID-19 · Media viability · Government response · Digital shift

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was not merely a global health catastrophe, but a shattering event of politics, economics, public policies, international politics, and world trade among others (Frieden 2020, p. 1). In December 2019, the new coronavirus COVID-19, a type of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), started in the Wuhan province of the People's Republic of China. As of

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December 27, 2020, there were 80 million confirmed cases globally and 1.75 million deaths on its trail (WHO 2020). In Nigeria, as of December 26, 2020, there were 85,587 confirmed cases, about 1247 deaths while 70,495 had been discharged (NCDC 2020).

Besides loss of lives, the socio-economic implication of COVID-19 on the global landscape varies from country to country. Nevertheless, the general view, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA 2020) is that, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities, engender global suffering and jeopardize lives and livelihood at an un-unimaginable scale. According to (Kretchmer 2020, p. 8), “hundreds of millions of people could be left without work as a result of COVID-19” and “1.6 billion informal economy workers could suffer ‘massive damage’ to their livelihoods.” The report specifically outlined the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on the G7 nations’ economies. For example, more than 20 million jobs were lost in April in the United States; over 7.2 million people applied for emergency unemployment credit in Canada while 1.76 million are unemployed in Japan. Besides, over 2 million people applied for universal credit in the United Kingdom; about 10 million workers applied for partial employments in France over 10 million applied for government assistance in Germany (Kretchmer 2020, p. 8).

In Nigeria, COVID-19-induced lockdown caused about 300,000 job losses in the leisure and hospitality industry, with travel crashes and cancellations of bookings expected to continue (CSEA 2020). In particular, the Micro, Small, and Medium Scale Enterprises (MSMEs), which include the media industry was the worst affected by the general lockdown. This is due to their relatively low savings capacity and because of the official restrictions on the free movement of goods and people which MSMEs depend upon to keep their supply chains and ultimately make their businesses running profitably (Nnanna 2020). In the present circumstance, the media are institutional structure that updates the public on measures, best practices, and other essential health information to checkmate the spread of Coronavirus. As COVID-19 continues to bare its fang, each country has evolved certain policies. On her part, Nigeria in collaboration with other international agencies particularly, WHO took certain political decisions with economic implications, which is the focus of this study.

Against the above background, the chapter attempts to, among others; evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Nigeria’s economy in general and the media industry in particular; examine the social, political, and economic policies of the government and their implications for media management and sustainability; and investigate the prospect and challenges of managing the media during the COVID-19 era. Furthermore, the chapter identifies some coping strategies which the media could adopt to survive the present challenges posed by COVID-19.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative research that relies on primary and secondary data. In-depth interviews were conducted with media stakeholders to know the challenges they faced in managing and sustaining the media during the peak of COVID-19. The government officials were also interviewed to explain why the media industry was excluded from the distribution of financial palliatives and relief materials distributed to other sectors of the economy. Data were obtained from secondary sources such as policy documents from the Federal Ministry of Health, National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, Central Bank, and World Health Organisation Offices in Nigeria. Existing data were also gathered from online and offline sources such as newspapers, magazines, journals and books, bulletins, newsletters, and other publications of government agencies coordinating COVID-19.

The findings were discussed, and recommendations were made on ways of keeping the media industry afloat during difficult times such as the COVID-19 era.

Theoretical Underpinning

This research is anchored on and guided by political economy theory of the media propounded by William Stanley Jevons in 1871. The theory argued that the manner in which the media function is shaped by the political environment where they operate, ownership influence, market environment (whether free or regulated), advertisers' impact, and availability of financial support. Political economy is an interdisciplinary branch of the social sciences that focuses on the interrelationships among individuals, governments, and public policy giving birth to wealth production and distribution among people with unequal strength, access to education, and economic wealth. There are three notable types of political economy theories, i.e., capitalism, socialism, and communism.

It needs to be emphasized that Nigeria's economy is neither strictly capitalist nor is it of purely socialist. The Nigerian economy is driven by a mixture of capitalism which emphasizes private ownership of the means of production and socialism that advocates for public or government ownership of properties. By this, both the private and the public sectors are invested in businesses in some strategic areas such as energy and power, manufacturing, estate, banking, insurance, and media among others.

Literature Review

An Overview of Political Economy of Nigerian Media

The critical political economy literature is replete with a plethora of definitions anchored on different ideological premises. The concept of political economy is understood as a collective term for theories and approaches that deal with the issues of culture and the media; and by extension, appreciates the interrelationships between economic process and specific political circumstances (Hardy 2014). While contributing to the political economy discourse (Ikpe 2000, pp. 14–15) perceives “political economy as the manner by which political decisions and interests influence the location of economic activities and the distribution of their costs and benefits.” Going by the above definitions, certain facts emerged. The market and economic forces exert influences on the production and distribution of power and resources among states and other political actors. This suggests that media markets are part of the capitalist economic structure with close link to the political system of a country (Fourie 2007, p. 136). Salawu (2018, p. 309) notes that the media industry sticks to four basic features of the capitalist mode of production. These include mass production and distribution of commodities, capital intensive technology, managerial organizations with specialization and cost-efficiency as the basis of success.

It is difficult to rightly define the political-economic theory of the media in Nigeria without understanding the theory that drives the Nigerian economy. The argument that it is capitalist-oriented could not stand because, according to Ogunde, the difficulties involved in the acquisition of private property, freedom of choice, self-interest, and competition all of which are crucial elements of a thriving capitalist or free-market economy are absent in Nigeria. Besides, Ogunde added that there are heightened problems of transport costs, protectionist trade policies, inadequate power supplies, and insecurity, all of which create an inclement environment for private sector expansion.

Another school of thought also argues that Nigerian economy could not be straightly described as socialist in nature. The reason, according to Tochukwu (2018), is that key elements of a socialist system are clearly missing in the socio-economic climate of Nigeria. The government is central to the production process which it unequally distributes based on class distinctions. In other words, the government controls and determines who gets what, why, and how, based on educational and economic strength and other factors. There is absence of government protection in terms of tax incentives for emerging businesses except for monopolistic companies having a direct connection with the government. Based on the above, we can conclude that Nigeria’s economy is neither strictly capitalist nor socialist but rather, a mixed economy incorporating both capitalist (free market) and socialist ideals.

A basic principle of political economy theory according to Apuke (2017, p. 26) is that those who belong to special groups: the rich, multinational industrial organizations, big financial corporations, big advertising conglomerates, communication

technology, and oil giants among others, take the lion share of the available resources. This has always been the battleground between the rich and the poor as the wealthy hardly want to be taxed to pay the poor but rather, the reverse is true. This explains why the government's decision may sometimes appear odd and unfavorable to the poor and the vulnerable groups.

A good deal of political economy research has focused on the evolution of mass communication/media as commodities that are produced and distributed by profit-seeking organizations in a capitalist economy. By this observation, the media organizations are perceived first as businesses and economic generating means for the community where they operate (Aderibigbe 2018). An analysis of media operation as a business venture has given birth to several concepts such as commodification/commercialization, diversification, horizontal/ vertical integration, and concentration among others. According to Popoola (2018, p. 6), media and communication resources have become commodities (products and services) that are offered for sale to buyers and consumers for profit. By diversification, he sees the media as a relatively large organization with diversification into new lines of business from which each line seeks to maximize profits. Media are also perceived as expanding corporations with the ability to integrate new organizations, both horizontally and vertically.

Under capitalist societies, majority of producers of public communications are privately owned and generate considerable returns for shareholders either by crafting symbolic goods (media messages) for direct sales in the media market without considering other aspects of life or by assembling audiences as commodities to be sold by the media to the advertisers according to ratings and other market criteria (Ayodabo and Babatunde 2018).

Media ownership influence has been a recurring issue in the political economy of the media and has been criticized because of its implication for both media management and practice. Adejola and Bello (2014) note that most media owners, especially in Nigeria, have commercial and political interests which they seek to protect regardless of whether or not they offend journalistic principles of objectivity, accuracy, balance, and fairness. Closely related to ownership influence is the wave of privatization and commercialization that concentrated the media in a few hands and have placed the acquisition and control of the internet within their grasp. It is worrisome that commercial interests of media owners and advertisers are now the primary determinants of media contents, bringing about a compromise of ethics and objectivity (UNESCO 2011).

Another salient matter relating to the political economy of the media is the issue of coverage and concentration of operation. Media coverage is lopsided in favor of urban centers at the expense of the rural communities. The consequences of this uneven media coverage, according to Fourie (2007, p. 137), include reduction in independent media sources, focus on the largest markets and their tastes, avoidance of risks, reduced investment in less profitable media tasks (such as investigative journalism and documentary film making), and neglect of rural and poor potential audience.

According to Enahoro (2010, p. 208), in every media system globally, certain interests of the government usually manifest. In Nigeria for instance, some of the media outlets (broadcast and print) are privately owned while some are owned and managed by the government and it exerts some statutory regulatory authority through the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). The above presupposes that the production and distribution of information are concentrated in the hands of their owners (public and private) whose ideas, views, and interests are protected.

Findings

Understanding the Political Economy of Government's Response to COVID-19 in Nigeria

The government's policy response to COVID-19 varies from country to country depending on the health, economic, and political exigencies of each. For example, the dread of a long global recession prompted most developed nations to take unilateral decisions against multilateral to curtail the spread of the Coronavirus and to minimize the anticipated economic adversity. According to the a total of 32 countries and territories, adopted stringent and immediate export restrictions on critical medical supplies and drugs that were specifically meant to respond to COVID-19. From America, to Switzerland, Germany, Russia, India, and France, there were export bans of all kinds of medical protection gear including breathing devices, medical gloves and protective suits, drugs, and medical supplies such as hydroxychloroquine, ventilators, personal protections masks, and oxygen therapy apparatus. These are in addition to border closure. Although these policies were believed to hurt the developing nations severely, they are actually protection policies aimed at safeguarding citizens.

In the case of Nigeria, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the country had been battling a weak economy owing to the decline in the price of its crude oil in the world market. This, coupled with the outbreak of Lasa fever in the early part of 2019 compelled the government to take certain deft political decisions with economic implications. The decisions were guided by the following enquiries: what restrictions to impose and when to ease them, how much funds are required, how will the funds be generated and disbursed, and what national interests could be deemphasized to pave way for international cooperation. These certainly involved the combined efforts of the government, medical experts, and researchers, social scientists and psychologists; taking into consideration the economic factor and political constraint.

During the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the NCDC through the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) continued to lead the national public health response in Nigeria with oversight of the PTF on COVID-19. Several drastic decisions were taken by the Federal Government of Nigeria through the

PTF-COVID-19 in conjunction with the Federal Ministry of Health to curb the spread of the disease and secure the health of Nigerians (NCDC 2020, pp. 1–2). The decisions included: closure of the international borders, interstate travel restrictions, total lockdown of commercial activities, schools, worship centers, and recreation arenas. These were political decisions with economic costs. Specifically, the Nigerian government through the Central Bank also responded by supporting hospitals and the pharmaceutical industry with low-interest loans to immediately deal with the public health crises. The CBN also worked with the private sector Coalition Against COVID (CACOVID) to raise approximately \$20 million in cash and to mobilize palliatives (food items) for the poor and vulnerable. Other policies put in place by government composed of granting additional moratorium of one year on CBN intervention facilities; reducing their interest rates from nine percent to five; creation of N450 billion credit facility for affected households and MSMEs; facilitating easy access to cheap and long-term loans for MSMEs; providing N1 trillion in loans to boost local manufacturing and production across critical sectors; engendering financial inclusion by ensuring the poor and vulnerable are empowered by all means necessary, through banks, microfinance, community, and nonbank financial institutions, to access financial services to meet their basic needs (Emefiele 2020, p. 14).

Despite government’s huge fiscal intervention provided to boost local manufacturing and empower other critical sectors, surprisingly, the media industry did not benefit from the largesse. The consequence of this, according to (Owolabi and Samson 2019) is that, the media have continued to operate in a very hostile economic atmosphere.

Discussion of Findings

Condition of the Media During COVID-19 Pandemic

Obi-Ani and Isiani observe that social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter became the most dependable source of information to Nigerians during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first Coronavirus victim was reported through different social media. Given the significant number of Nigerians connected to those platforms, the dissemination of health information became quite easy. Health care agencies like the NCDC and PTF provide daily updates on the number of cases and fatalities recorded in Nigeria through these social media platforms. This gave Nigerian citizens better opportunities to be fully prepared for COVID-19 as against the period of the Influenza pandemic when information pertaining to its spread, impact, and curtailment were inadequate.

Another major aberration observed in the workings of journalists is their repression by the state. The chairman of the Nigerian Union of Journalists NUJ recounts that the pandemic ushered in difficult times for Nigerian journalists who had to do their jobs in the face of a new “unwritten rule,” “you cannot criticize government

officials.” Going by some recorded incidences at the peak of COVID-19, the only information allowed to be published/broadcast were those volunteered by the government or its appointed agents which, in most cases, portrayed the government in good light. This is against the provisions of Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) which stipulates that “the media have a responsibility to hold the government accountable to the people.”

Contrary to the above constitutional provisions, between March and May 2020, there were no fewer than 10 instances of reported assaults on journalists in Nigeria apart from those who lost their jobs (Offiong 2020, p. 9). The Chairman of Imo State NUJ chapter on May 28, 2020, said that a female reporter, Angela Nkwo-Akpolu, of *Leadership* newspaper was assaulted and her iPad seized by personnel from the Department of State Security Service. The Media Rights Agenda (MRA) in a statement reported that the reporter was attacked while taking pictures of a hotel in Owerri where guests were forcibly quarantined on the grounds that the hotel did not comply with the government’s COVID-19 protocol.

The restrictions on movement within and across state boundaries put in place by the government also affected the distribution of newspapers and magazines. Due to the fear of contracting COVID-19 disease, people refused to buy newspapers and vendors also declined to circulate them. Therefore, people turned to online editions rather than risked their lives to buy hard copy newspapers. Considering the schedules of journalists, frequent movement around the cities and communities was inevitable thus, making them vulnerable to contracting the virus. Perhaps, this is the reason why the Nigerian media industry lost seven active journalists to COVID-19 (Sule and Nwankwo 2020). These are apart from 12 others who were tested positive and ended up being admitted to the isolation centers in different states.

Within the first eight months of its outbreak in Nigeria, the COVID-19 pandemic occasioned a vast interruption in individual routine and gave rise to severe economic recession characterized by loss of jobs and pay cuts across various industries including the media. According to (Obadofin 2020, p. 12), “the pandemic caused significant drop in revenue for media outlets in Nigeria due to sharp drop in circulation and advertisement.” Other “*challenges resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak, according to (Odotola 2020), included reduction in print pagination and staff furloughing.*” *All the national newspapers in Nigeria such as the Nation, Punch, Guardian, Vanguard, The Sun, Tribune, and This Day took drastic measures by reducing their pagination by almost half; slashed the staff salaries by 45–50 percent and reduced staff strength by about 30–40% due to what the management called “the reduction of newspaper readership.” The General manager of Complete Sports, a specialized newspaper said, “I decided to pay off all the workers at the height of the pandemic in April (2020) so as to pave way for financial reengineering.” The broadcast sub-sector of the industry is not faring better. Except for the few ones that are owned and financed by the government, all others had no choice but to send some of their staff on compulsory leave without pay till the situation improved.*

The narrative is not different in the global media space. Jonty (2020) reported that the UK *Financial Times*’ print sales dropped by 39% in April. Also, ITV’s

advertising [revenue](#) diminished by 42% and FOX in the United States by 50% at the same period. A [survey](#) by the *Network Times* reports that about 36,000 media workers have been laid off, or had their pay slashed due to the shutdown of many newspapers such as *The Stranger* in Seattle, digital empires like *Vox Media*, and *Gannett*, the nation's largest newspaper chain.

As the pandemic ravaged the world, death rates kept mounting and the economic misery continued to soar. It became increasingly important that both the national and the multinational governments put heads together to check the spread of the deadly virus. Africa and indeed, Nigeria are believed to have fragile health care delivery systems that cannot effectively respond to the growing needs of infected patients, especially those with complications requiring admission into Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for Acute Respiratory Diseases (ARDs) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

While the pandemic continues to bare its fang, the reality is that poverty and inequality breathe lives into the disease, especially in Nigeria that is regarded as the poverty capital of the world (Kazeem 2018). The matter is made worse by the fact of government's misplacement of priorities coupled with other factors such as high-level corruption among the political elites, uneven distribution of wealth to every sector, and the uncoordinated attention given to the economy in general. The consequences of the discriminatory, inept, and inconsistent responses are vividly illustrated in the economic adversity that befell some sectors of Nigeria's economy especially, the media. The question arising from the above is: how will the media industry survive and be sustained in this precarious situation without compromising their professional ethics?

Economics of Managing the Media During the COVID-19 Era

The media as the fourth estate are to professionally inform, educate, entertain the public, and serve as a watchdog over the conduct of public affairs. In addition, the media provide information that enhances the functionality of the political and economic market. For the media to efficiently carry out these traditional functions require deft management. The management of media organization according to Ayodabo and Babatunde (2018, p. 326), can be examined from two perspectives. The first is the personnel and space management which deals with the management of human resources to achieve corporate goals and to conserve space and material. The second is the material production management that takes care of the quality of newsprints and other production materials, soft copies, editorial processes, depth of research, news gathering, and logistics. While contributing to the discussion on economics of media management, Murdock and Goldings (2016) also observed that the media as an economic institution must be examined in terms of production and distribution. Besides, it is important to emphasize that as a business venture, the media management and operations are directed by the entrepreneurial principle

governing other establishments in the society although with the inherent notion of social responsibility.

In capitalist societies where the major producers of public communications are privately owned, their primary goals are to profitably manage the enterprise so as to generate substantial dividends for their shareholders either by producing tangible goods for direct sales or by assembling media audiences for marketers and advertisers on cash and carry basis.

It is pertinent to note that media ownership policy affects the management and audience's preference for media organizations. For instance, according to Ayodabo and Babatunde (2018, pp. 329–330), viewers in Nigeria have a preference for some privately owned media such as African Independent Television, Channels Television, and Television Continental among others, when compared with the viewership of the Nigerian Television Authority and other state-owned television stations. The same is for the newspaper genre. Privately owned newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Sun*, and *Tribune* have more patronage among business class, youths, and job seekers. Most reading and viewing public who are longing for credible and unbiased news reporting also give preference to newspapers produced by privately owned media outfits. In essence, privately owned media attract more readership and viewership than government-owned outfits. The above observations concerning viewership and readership levels explain why marketers, advertisers, and business classes often prefer to patronize privately owned media when it comes to advertisement placement. This fact, according to Adejola and Bello (2014), also explains why more privately owned media organizations are more self-sustaining and vibrant than the government owned.

Preceding the current disruptions occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, the media industry had been threatened many times (Owolabi and Samson 2019). Since the turn of the century, digitization of content, the rise of social media, and acceleration in mobile consumption have forced the youth population to migrate online. Freedman (2010, p. 35) also observed that “newspapers and magazines in particular are imperiled as a result of audiences decline and shrinking advertisement revenue in the face of increasing competition from online news providers.”

The pandemic has also paved the way for every publisher and distributor to benefit more from advertising and the attention of consumers that migrated online. The social distancing policy and the total lockdown which pushed most youths online have created new business opportunities of reaching large audiences through social media platforms. Some of these media are thriving and their addressable markets are getting bigger.

Despite the strategic role the media played before and during the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the political economy of government's response to it was not favorable to the industry. Apart from the 50% tax rebates given to all businesses that registered under the Companies and Allied Matters Act, the privately owned media did not benefit from other aspects of the COVID-19 palliatives which the government provided for other organizations. When asked why the government excluded the media as social institutions from the list of beneficiaries of COVID-19 palliatives, the Minister of Information, Alhaji Lai Mohammed said the media are private

ventures and they should take care of themselves. When reminded of other private organizations that benefitted from the distribution of palliatives, he said, “If that is the case, the government will find another way of cushioning the effect of the pandemic on the media industry.” However, pundits have proffered reasons for the Minister’s answer. The ownership structure of the media in Nigeria is divided between the government and some private individuals most of whom have strong political and/or business ties with the government in power. The attitude of the present government to the privately owned media is a “clever” way of showing its displeasure in their style of reporting government activities. The banning of Twitter, the threat of other social media operating in Nigeria, and the speedy consideration of the controversial Social Media Bill by the National Assembly are confirmation of government’s anti-media postures. Accordingly, the bill if passed into law proposes life imprisonment for convict and total closure of the medium involved for a minimum of ten years.

The economic condition of the media in Nigeria is made worse by the fact that the financial institutions are not always disposed to advancing credit to media organizations as they are perceived as risky investments that take a longer period of adept management to break even and be self-sustaining. Moreover, the media industry is also observed to experience a high mortality rate. The above reasons explain why media owners often resorted to diversifying resources from other investments into the business or borrowing from informal sources. Some proprietors do volunteer their medium as the mouthpiece of a political party with the intention of gaining undue favor. Each time this occurs, truth, objectivity, and fairness, which are the hallmarks of journalism, are usually sacrificed on the altar of political patronage. For example, two prominent media groups in Nigeria were dragged before the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) in 2018 for offenses that border on corruption. The publisher of *This Day* newspaper, Nduka Obaigbena was alleged to have collected N670 million from the former Security Adviser to the Federal government out of the funds allocated for arms purchase while the proprietor of Africa Independent Television, Raymond Dokpesi was also involved in money laundering to the tune of N2.1 billion. Over the years, these two media organizations were reputed for compromising media ethics by defending programs and policies of any government in power whether good or bad.

There are media organizations that have also taken to commercializing news content by insisting on charging fees for covering company annual general meetings AGM; even the daily briefing of NCDC. Going by their unethical behavior, they are not only compromising the integrity of news, but they are also actually insulting their audience and breaching the national broadcasting code (Adaba 2019).

Another unethical phenomenon that characterizes the media in Nigeria during the COVID-19 is what is often referred to as wrap-around, wherein the entire front and back pages of a newspaper and a substantial number of inside pages are filled with adverts, leaving just a few pages of news content for readers. This, according to Arogundade (2019), amounts to selling fake products to the reading publics. This was the feature of *The Nation*, *Vanguard*, *Tribune*, and *This Day* newspapers on

March 29, 2020, and September 21, 2020, the birthdays of Bola Tinubu, a top political leader and his wife, Senator Oluremi Tinubu, respectively.

The “brown envelope syndrome” is another form of reprehensible conduct caused by the dismal economy heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. This simply refers to as “the gift given to journalists in cash purportedly in appreciation of their coverage.” In other words, it means “bribing a journalist in anticipation of favorable coverage” (Akabogu 2005, p. 202). This professional misconduct existed since before the outbreak of COVID-19 but has now become prevalent to the extent of some media proprietors tactically removing payment of salaries and wages of journalists from their obligations to their workers. *This Day* Newspaper group and African Independent Television Group have been notorious for these. The pertinent question is: to what extent can a journalist that is not paid at the end of the month resist the temptation to collect brown envelopes?

One other feature of media practice during coronavirus era is the tendency to relapse into sensationalism and human-interest stories. The human-interest story is a feature story that discusses a person, people, sex, crime, and disaster news in a sensational way. The print media resorted to this style of journalism on realizing that media engagement is higher during the lockdown and that between 80% and 90% of people consume news and entertainment for an average of almost 24 h during a typical week. Human angle stories, therefore, became the regular menu the media serve their audience to satisfy their information quest and entertainment desire. It is therefore not surprising that most media content during the time were products of gossip, news agencies, and press releases.

Sustainable Strategies for Media Managers

Globally, the media have always had various challenges to contend with. For the media industry to survive at a difficult time requires adroit resourceful management and proven sustainable strategies. According to Owolabi and Samson (2021), if the media would ever be a catalyst and not drag in the wheel of development, it must be sufficiently equipped and well managed to function at its best despite constraints. Minnie (2008) suggests a number of strategies through which the media can be sustained during an economic depression.

On the challenge of underfunding, Minnie opines that media houses could marry their resources together as consortiums to import newsprints and other consumables. Besides, they could also embark on joint distribution of their newspapers and magazines as well as collectively negotiate for advertisement rates. In South Africa, an Association of Small Independent Local Newspapers was established to give the members strong bargaining power when making a purchase in the market.

In the opinion of Owolabi and O’Neill media houses with identical editorial focus may merge together to form a bigger organization under a new name. Alternatively, the one with a larger capital base may acquire the smaller ones. According to Graves

(2010, p. 9), between January and May 2007, about 372 of such mergers occurred globally in the media industry with some of them involving American-based companies. Merger and acquisition are two business strategies by which media organizations can enlarge their capital base and become financially independent.

It has also been observed by financial experts that the media, instead of borrowing from conventional banks, may also consider raising funds from the stock market. For example, the Media Works (NZ) Limited, a New Zealand television broadcast group once had a financial crisis and in 2004, a Canadian broadcast group through the capital market acquired 100% shares of the group, renamed it as CanWest Media Work (NZ) Limited and eventually sold 30% of its share interest to the public. The African Newspapers Limited (ANL), the publisher of *Tribune* titles and the oldest surviving private newspaper in Nigeria also threaded this pathway in 1998 when it ran into financial crisis. Surprisingly, most media managers hardly ever consider this financial window.

Ifijie (2019) also observes that there is an urgent need for a change in the media business model in Nigeria. For many years, the media have been running on credit: agents run commercials on credit and adverts are also published on credit, thus leaving owners and managers at the mercy of agents and advertisers. In other sectors of the economy, services are rendered on cash and carry basis but in the media industry, products are consumed while services are enjoyed before payment is made. This explains the high unsold copies that are usually returned to the company and the huge unpaid adverts rates, which commonly become bad debt.

According to Minnie (2008), the United Nations and other International Development Agencies could also launch a media development fund that could provide assistance in funding and training of media practitioners, especially among developing nations. However, this must be done with close monitoring so as to check situations where the funds allocated for media development are diverted into unintended projects.

It is noteworthy that during this COVID-19 crisis, a news media recovery plan was launched for the United Kingdom and Ireland to revive the media industry for better performance. A donation fund account was opened for its members in need. The union's hardship funds are expected to help those affected by the coronavirus. A similar strategy was adopted in France during the 2007/2008 global financial crisis. The then President; Nicholas Sarkozy had to embark on a bail out strategy to prevent some badly affected newspapers from closing (Pfanner 2009).

Another strategy is the optimization of search engines to drive traffic to a firm's website. It is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). This is a proven strategy put in place to make sure news aggregators, search engines, bloggers, and anyone else who can redirect traffic to one's news website are able to scroll the news headlines of affected news organizations. In other words, the news firms package their news stories in a way the news aggregators/search engines could locate them and thus redirect traffic to the news firms. In the media industry, traffic equals page views and the more page views the news site gets, the more advertisers are attracted to advertise on such heavy traffic sites. This will consequently lead to more revenue for the news media organization.

At the international level, Seamus Dooley, Irish NUJ secretary having recognized the fact that the COVID-19 crisis had negatively impacted the Irish media industry called on all parties engaged in government information to be committed to media rescue plan and to establish a Commission on the future of the media in Ireland.

NUJ (2020) advocates for targeted measures by the government aimed at supporting jobs and quality journalism. Specific intervention is needed to protect and invest in hyperlocal and community enterprises. The union proposed both short- and medium-term measures which they believe can impact positively on the practice of journalism. Some of these short-term measures are discussed below:

(a) The provision of tax credits and interest-free loans to support journalists who are frontline reporters covering the COVID-19 crisis and recovery. (b) The provision of free vouchers for online or print subscriptions for people aged 70 years and above, in line with the free TV license scheme. (c) To take immediate and necessary steps to address the financial crisis in public service broadcasting.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has left no one in doubt that it has the potential of crippling the world economy and bringing many nations to their knees. The fact that the impact of the pandemic is felt at varying degrees could possibly be responsible for why instead of a coordinated international response, policymakers in each country decided to divert resources away from other countries through banning of food and drugs exportation, and hoarded essential supplies. The consequences of a disunited response are seen in the global fatality rate of unimaginable scale. The Nigerian government in particular has taken numerous health, social, and economic measures to cushioning the impact of COVID-19. However, the policy responses have weaknesses and, taken together, are unfavorable to the media industry. This study, specifically found that the political economy of Nigerian government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic which includes low-interest loans to the SMEs, as well as other CBN's financial interventions to the formal and informal sectors of the economy were not tailored to benefit the media industry. As such, the media as a key player in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic are worse for it. This, therefore, explains why the media have been left to struggle on their own with a heightened record of mortality, loss of professionals to retrenchment, loss of reporters to COVID-19, escalated economic misfortune, and above all, compromised professional standard of practice. The study also discovered that as a result of sensationalizing of news, the media entertain a lot and inform a little, thus creating armies of less-informed audiences and erosion of robust democratic engagement that is essential for good governance in this time of global health crises.

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