

Appraising Audience Views of the Influence of News Commercialization on Credibility of Broadcast News Content. A Study of Residents of Minna Metropolis Niger State

Ezeah, Greg Ph.D

Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Jonah Alice Aladi

Department of Mass Communication, The Federal Polytechnic, Bida

***Corresponding Authors:** Ezeah, Greg Ph.D, Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

The study investigates the view of audience of Minna metropolis on the Influence of News Commercialization on Credibility of Broadcast News Content. One of the objectives of the study was to determine how news commercialization influences credibility of broadcast news. The quantitative survey design was used, with the Social Responsibility theory as the basis for the study. The focus was on the audience with educational qualification of First Degree and above who were purposively selected across the 11 wards in Minna metropolis. Sample size of 384 respondents was administered questionnaire using the Likert Scale method. The data generated were presented and analyzed using simple tables and percentages. Findings revealed that 39.9% strongly agree that news commercialization crumbles credibility of news since only the views of the rich and powerful are carried. This shows that the audience strongly agrees that only the views of the rich and powerful are carried in the news. The study recommends, among others, that the broadcast media can through news bulletin, commentaries, current affairs etc, bring news to the door step of the common man on the streets to regain their confidence and trust, once again.

Keywords: Audience, broadcast news content, influence, credibility, News Commercialization

INTRODUCTION

The mass media are tools for mass communication saddled with the responsibilities to inform, educate and entertain members of the society. It is through the mass media that the society gets to know what is happening within and outside the country to enable them react accordingly. One of the ways to carry out these responsibilities is by disseminating information to vast heterogeneous audience through broadcast news by radio and television.

At this point in time, there is need to establish the concept of news in the context of which it is presented in this paper. News is regarded as an account of current issues and events which are considered to be of social significance and public interest. This definition stems from the fact that news is all about and concerned with what the audience should be interested to know.

The entire process of gathering, sorting, processing and disseminating news requires both educational and technical skills along with ethical judgment which journalists must possess. In line with this, Adaja (2012) opines that journalism is concerned with the gathering, processing and dissemination of information regarded as important and critical to the operations of the different components of the society.

Udomisor and Kenneth (2012) observe that the mass media are tools for mass communication which have unique responsibilities to inform, educate and entertain members of the society and that through the mass media the society gets to know what is happening within and around the country and react accordingly. News reporting is actually an avenue through which society keep abreast with important occurrences within and outside the country.

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However, “news is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events, it is now about packaged broadcast, or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties.” (Omenugha and Oji, 2008 p.14). In recent times news has become commercialized with the slogan: ‘Let Them Pay’ (LTP) which many if not all broadcast stations and in fact all media organizations are adopting till date.

News commercialization has become a major trend in news treatment globally, and an issue of ethical concern in the mass media. It is a thoughtful approach adopted through which the media relegates its responsibility of surveying the society – disseminating information on the event, and people of social interest aside for financial gains.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The birth of news commercialization has not only affected the level of ethical standards in journalism practice, but it has also tilted news towards one direction: to meet the interest of those who pay for the news. This has in turn affected the quality of news reports and credibility of journalists and the news content itself. The implication is that Nigerians no longer trust what they hear or see in the broadcast media.

The commercialization phenomenon posed a lot of challenges to the credibility of the news stories reported by journalists because stories of events are usually arranged to suit their sponsors. Usually, the stories “add nothing tangible to the quality of life of the people” and “there is nothing journalistically newsworthy about them” (Oso, 2012).

As Kenneth and Odorume (2015) put *it*, “the broadcast media organizations should exist to serve public interest. However, recent journalism practice in Nigeria seems to be plagued with the malady of news commercialization. What this portends is that only the rich will get their ideas communicated to the public thus relegating the common to the background. Media organizations are undeniably expected to protect the public interest of their audiences.”

A lot of studies have been carried out on journalists’ perception of news commercialization. For instance, Oberiri (2016) carried out a study on “Journalists’ Perception of News Commercialization and its implication on Media Credibility in Nigeria.” His focus was

on Journalists in Jalingo Metropolis. He examined the extent to which news commercialization influences objectivity, fairness, balance and truth in reporting. No study has yet looked at it from the audience’s view. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to find out the views of the audience about the credibility of news content since they are the receivers of the news contents.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of this study include:

1. To find out how the audience in Minna metropolis view broadcast news contents
2. To ascertain the views of the audience on the credibility of broadcast news contents
3. To determine how news commercialization influences credibility of broadcast news
4. To establish whose interest broadcast news content portrays most

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the audience in Minna metropolis view broadcast news contents?
2. What are the views of the audience in Minna metropolis on the credibility of broadcast news contents?
3. How does news commercialization influence credibility of broadcast news?
4. Whose interest does broadcast news contents portray most?

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study is significant especially to broadcast media organizations and journalists as it will help them understand and how the public view the content of the news that they present to them. The study provides the needed force to boost professional standards in the practice of journalism in Nigeria at large.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of this study is narrowed down to how the audiences in Minna metropolis view the influence of news commercialization on credibility of broadcast news content. The study is limited to audience with First Degree/HND and above who reside in Minna metropolis. These are drawn from the 11 wards in Minna, namely: Nassarawa ‘A’, Nassarawa ‘B’, Nassarawa ‘C’, Tudun Wada South, Makera, Sabon Gari, Minna Central, Minna South,

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Tudun Wada North, Limawa 'A' and Limawa 'B'.

CONCEPT OF NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION

The birth of news commercialization in Nigeria dates back to 1986 when the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was introduced and as time went on, it eventually became an additional source of income for broadcast media organizations. As a result, the Nigerian broadcast media have commoditized news by presenting messages paid for as part of the news bulletin.

Ojoja (2009) defines news commercialization as a situation whereby stations begin to raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free. McManus (2009 Pp. 219 & 220) defines news commercialization as "any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve".

LEVELS OF BROADCAST NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION IN NIGERIA

Omenugha and Oji (2008), declare that news commercialization of the broadcast media operates at two levels in Nigeria: The institutional level and the individual journalist level. At the individual journalist level, journalists make monetary demands to cover an event to be reported in the news such as turbaning ceremonies, inaugural lectures and even birthdays from prominent Nigerians. They term this form of gratification as brown envelope syndrome which operates at different levels. They went further to say that the commercialization of news broadcast contravenes the provision of the NBC code in sections 5.1. 18 & 19 which clearly distinguishes between advertising in news and commercialization of news broadcast: "commercials in News and Current Affairs programmes shall be clearly identified and presented in a manner that shall make them clearly distinguishable" while "*the promotion of an organization, product or a service of commercial interest shall not be treated as news analysis, commentary or editorial*" (NBC, 2010 p. 44).

At the institutional level however, news commercialization occurs when an institution is given specific charges for various events to be

covered. In a nut shell, commercial messages during news broadcast should not be treated as part of news bulletin but limited to advertising messages interposed during breaks in a news broadcast.

It is usually difficult for editors to edit news that are paid for, based on professional ethics for fear of losing a big time client, as it is said, he who plays the piper dictates the tune. In the long run, the editor is forced to edit the news item on the basis of what might interest the sponsor, rather than the public.

McManus (2009, p.220) states that the economic rationalization of the news 'predicts a temporary decline of journalism's expensive but vital watchdog function'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of news commercialization emanated from the common practice of providing 'kolanuts' to visitors in Nigerian society (Nwabueze, 2010). According to Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012, p. 517)

Monetary gifts could pressurize a journalist into doing what the giver wants, and this makes the journalist unable to be objective in his reporting of events and issues involving the people who give such gifts. Thus, the news stories produced are likened to be commercial products that have been paid for by the customer which should serve the need to which the product is expected, in favour of the customer.

It is against this backdrop that (Oso, 2012) agrees that news commercialization posed a lot of challenges to the credibility of the news stories reported by Journalists since stories of events reported are usually presented to suit their sponsors. He also observed that the stories "add nothing tangible to the quality of life of the people" and "there is nothing journalistically newsworthy about them".

Idowu (2001 p.4), cited in Oberiri (2016) say that: for news to be useful it has to be credible, for it to be trusted it must measure up to some exacting standard of assessment such as: accuracy (when in doubt leave out), balance (reflect all sides of the story), fairness (impartiality to all parties involved), human angle (people minded), depth (well researched/investigated), presentation (telling the story rightly), and reward (be of social relevance to audience).

Therefore, news commercialization has become a tactful strategy through which the media relegates its responsibility of surveying the society, disseminating information on the event, and people of social interest aside for financial gains (Chioma, 2013). To this end, Asemah (2011, p.34) highlighted some negative effects of commercialization on the media and the society at large:

- It has given birth to a situation whereby news is narrowly defined against the weight of the news source's pocket. The media, whether print or electronic, now use money as criteria for publishing news.
- Another problem is the censorship and gate keeping problem, which news commercialization constitutes for the editor. The editor is handicapped under the commercialization policy. It is the duty of the editor to always edit stories, but, under the news commercialization policy, the editor cannot edit stories according to known standards or principles in journalism. He has to be so meticulous in the process of editing, so that he will not edit the substance and length of the story that has been paid for. Any story that has been paid for is not to be edited because, it has automatically become a sacred cow" that is, subjects or issues that get favour of the media houses. The ability of the editor to judge what is news or not is completely restricted because; money becomes the evaluator and perhaps the editor.
- Loss of credibility. The news commercialization policy has made journalists to lose credibility because, it is now believed that they pay attention to the wealthy people who can pay for news so that they can suppress, twist and falsify the stories; and government of some countries may bribe journalists to write favourable news items about its policies and programmes, even when they are inimical to public interest.

Supporting this assertion however, Okoro and Chinweobo-onuoha (2013) declare that commercialization has an adverse effect on the profession and its practitioners in varying degrees across the world. They added that brown envelope syndrome manifests itself in all areas of journalistic practices such as payment

to get journalists to cover events and also publish it. As Kenneth and Odorume (2015) put it, broadcast media organizations should exist to serve public interest. But the recent journalism practice in Nigeria now is beset with the problem of news commercialization, which signifies that only the rich will get their ideas communicated to the public thus relegating the common to the background. Media organizations are undeniably expected to protect the public interest of their audiences.

Asogwa & Asemah (2012) opine that some media outfits are established to generate income; hence, the media are profit oriented, media content is considered a commodity for sale, just like other commodities in a capitalist environment. This implies that a journalist who sells his conscience for money with the justification that it is news commercialization will end up deterring his reportage to suit the buyer of his conscience.

Adaja (2012) supports this assertion with his view that commercialization of broadcasting has contributed to the dearth of serious journalism in Nigerian Broadcasting. If this be the case then, one is bound to ask: what happened to the social responsibility that journalists are expected to uphold? Chioma (2013) provides the answer by submitting that the commercialization of news is a contradiction to the social responsibility function of the mass media, and that news should be presented as news and not as advertising or public relations. News reporting should not be treated as a profit-making life-line by broadcast media owners and journalists.

REVIEW OF RELATED EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Lee and Chyi (2014) conducted a study on "when newsworthy is not noteworthy: examining the value of news from the audiences perspective." They submit that the value of news content has rarely been examined from the audience's perspective. The study examined the "noteworthiness" of news content as perceived by the general public. They employed the survey research method on U.S. internet users and the result shows that only one third of the content produced by mainstream news media is perceived as noteworthy. The findings revealed that perceived noteworthiness is a stronger factor influencing news consumption in terms of news enjoyment, newspaper and television news use, and paying for print newspapers. They recommended among others that news organizations should rethink their content

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strategy and prioritize audience oriented value creation to serve news consumers at large.

In a related development, in 2017, Wurff and Schoenbach conducted a study on “Civic and Citizen demands of news media and Journalists: what does the audience expect from Good Journalism?” The was conducted to know what the audience expect from the media and the journalists in the Netherlands. Their findings show that the audience wants journalism to take citizens’ demands into account.

Oberiri (2016) carried out a study on “Journalists’ Perception of News Commercialization and its implication on Media Credibility in Nigeria” He focused on Journalists in Jalingo Metropolis. One of the objectives of the study is to examine the extent to which news commercialization influences objectivity, fairness, balance and truth in reporting.

The study adopted the quantitative survey design with a population of 293 Journalists in Jalingo Metropolis and a sample size of 75 purposively selected on the basis of on-the-job experience using the Taro Yame’s formula to determine the sample size. The instrument used was the Questionnaire. Findings revealed News commercialization affects objectivity and balance in reporting. The study further revealed that poor remuneration, personal greed and corruption are some of the reasons why news commercialization strives. The researcher recommended among others that Media professional bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the media industry by sanctioning defaulting journalists to ensure that journalism practitioners adhere to laid down codes of practice.

Similarly, Udomisor & Kenneth (2013) carried out a research to ascertain the impact of News Commercialization on Nigeria Broadcasting Commission Communication policy. There study reveals that “News commercialization is a practice that has unfortunately come to stay with the Nigeria society as a result of economic and psychological considerations. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) is supposed to serve the interest of the public and serve as a medium through which both the rich and poor can air their views freely. If media operators by charging money, they are reducing their credibility in the eyes of the public. They observed that advert companies determine the pace and flow of news, and what constitutes news at any point time. They suggested that for

media houses to regain their glory and rightful place in the minds of the public, the practitioners should be adequately remunerated. Also, instead of selling news, the stations can think of other sources of revenue like investments if it is private stations and increased funding in the case of government stations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory suitable for this study is the social responsibility theory. The theory came into limelight because the press misused the freedom given to them, which they enjoyed as a result of the free press. Under every free press it is expected that citizens be given opportunity to express themselves freely to enhance free flow of information. Therefore, the press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible.

The theory urges media practitioners to ensure representation of all facts not siding or becoming sensational in reportage but being balance and unbiased.

This implies that a journalist ought to protect his image by being fair, objective, unbiased, thereby reporting events and issues just the way they happened without colorizing it. This implies that the media are set up to serve the interests of the general public rather than personal interests.

There is an increasing commercialization of the media in Nigeria, the situation that has brought the integrity of the mass media enterprise to question. The social responsibility theory holds that while the press functions as a free enterprise, as guaranteed by the libertarian theory, it must be responsible to a society in which it operates. Based on this theory, the mass media are able to raise issues of public importance. Our mass media today do not seem to perform this social, duty as issues that set agenda for national development are compromised for “naira and kobo”.

This abuse at practice has received the attention of mass communication scholars and other stakeholders who now advocate for a reinvention of our media contents to make the media realize their potentials as tools for national development. (Asogwa & Asemah 2012)

Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso (2008, p.58) itemized five specific functions of the press which include:

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- To serve the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible.
- To inform the public to enable it to take self determined action.
- To protect the rights of the individual by acting as watchdog over the government.
- To serve the economic system, for instance the bringing together buyers and sellers through the medium of advertising.
- To preserve financial autonomy in order not to become dependent on special interests and influences.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the survey method which gives room for people to give their opinions on a given issue. The instrument used was the questionnaire which contained demographic data of respondents and the Likert Scale format was used to seek respondents' views. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique to select the samples from the 11 wards in Minna metropolis.

POPULATION OF STUDY

The population of Minna metropolis is given as 273,308 (National Bureau of Statistics). However, this study includes civil servants and people in private business who have obtained HND/First Degree and above who were purposively selected across the 11 wards in Minna metropolis. This is because they are the respondents that can adequately understand the issue at hand and make meaningful judgment of the issues.

SAMPLE SIZE

The sample size for this study is 384 which was determined using the sample size determination table by Cozby. According to Nabueze (2012), cited in Okoro, Nwafor and Odoemelam (2015 p.230)), "at + or - 5% error margin, a population of over 100,000 would have sample size of 384." Therefore, 384 questionnaire were distributed to respondents.

DATA PRESENTATION / DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Based on the fact that the research work adopted Survey method, simple percentage statistics was used to analyze data generated as well as to answer the research questions.

Table1. Occupation of respondents

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Civil servant	206	63.2%
Private enterprise	120	36.8%
Total	326	100%

Source: Field survey 2017

Table 1 above shows that majority of the respondents representing 63% are civil servants while 36.8% are into private enterprises.

Table2. Educational distribution of respondents

Options	Frequency	Percentage
HND/First Degree	204	62.6%
Masters Degree	106	32.5%
Ph.D	16	4.9%
Total	326	100%

Source: field survey 2017

Table 2 indicates that all the respondents are averagely eligible to present their views on the credibility of broadcast news since they all have high educational requirements. The least educational level comprises respondents with First degree /HND (62.6%), while 32.5% with Masters Degree and 4.9% have Ph.D. from the foregoing, it is clear that the respondents can attest to their claims on the options provided for each question.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How does the Audience in Minna Metropolis View Broadcast News Contents?

This was answered in the statement: most news are paid for and individuals and interest groups pay the media to project the ideas they want the people to accept.

Table3.

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	120	36.9%
Strongly agree	164	50.3%
Disagree	20	6.1%
Strongly disagree	20	6.1%
Undecided	2	0.6%
Total	326	100%

Source: field survey 2017

In the table above, 50.3% of respondents strongly agree that most news are paid for and individuals and interest groups pay the media to project the ideas they want the people to accept. However, 36.9% agree with this while 6.1% strongly disagree. This implies that the audience already view broadcast news contents as news about those who pay for it.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What are the views of the audience in Minna metropolis on the credibility of broadcast news contents?

To provide answer to the research question, item 9 of the second section of the instrument provided the required data. “Government officials and wealthy individuals can pay journalists and broadcast organizations to write favourable news about policies and programmes that they want the public to accept.”

Table4.

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	109	33.4%
Strongly agree	189	57.9%
Disagree	17	5.2%
Strongly disagree	9	2.8%
Undecided	2	0.6%
Total	326	99.9%

Source: field survey 2017

Table 4 shows that 57.9% strongly agree that Government officials and wealthy individuals can pay journalists and broadcast organizations to write favourable news about policies and programmes that they want the public to accept. However, only 2.8% strongly disagree.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

How does News Commercialization Influence Credibility of News?

The answer to this question was provided in item 5 of the questionnaire which states that: “news commercialization crumbles credibility of news since only the views of the rich and powerful are carried.”

Table5.

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	108	33.1%
Strongly agree	130	39.9%
Disagree	9	2.8%
Strongly disagree	48	14.7%
Undecided	31	9.5%
Total	326	100%

Source: field survey 2017

Table 5 indicates that 39.9% strongly agree that news commercialization crumbles credibility of news since only the views of the rich and powerful are carried. This shows that the audience strongly agree that only the views of the rich and powerful are carried in the news

While 14.7% strongly disagrees with the statement.

RESEARCH QUESTION 4

Whose interest does news contents portray most?

This was answered in the item 8 of the questionnaire which states that: broadcast media organizations and journalists pay more attention to individuals and organizations who pay for news than the common man on the streets.

Table6.

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	81	24.8%
Strongly agree	162	49.7%
Disagree	43	13.2%
Strongly disagree	38	11.7%
Undecided	2	0.6%
Total	326	100%

Source: field survey 2017

Table 6 shows that 49.7% strongly agrees that journalists and broadcast organizations pay more attention to individuals and organizations who pay for news than the common man on the streets. This affirms the saying that he who plays the piper dictates the tune. Meanwhile, 11.7% disagrees with this statement.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was to know the views of residents of Minna metropolis Niger State about how news commercialization influences credibility of broadcast news content. The audience have shown through the study that news commercialization can crumble credibility of news since the major voices of the people that make news are those who have the means to pay for them. Against this backdrop, the audience 162 (49.7%) respondents strongly agree that journalists and broadcast organizations pay more attention to those who pay for news.

It is obvious that the practice of news commercialization has come to stay in Nigeria especially at this time of economic recession. But this practice reduces the credibility of media practitioners in the eyes of the public as indicated in table 5 where 39.9% respondents strongly agree that since only the views of the rich and powerful are carried. Since he who pays the piper dictates the tune, those who pay for news determine what constitutes news at a given time and their views are always aired.

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This is dangerous for the broadcast media and journalists since they are responsible to the general public and not only a few. Christopher and Onwuka (2013, p.15) attest to this:

Responsible and ethical journalism will preserve achievements attributable to the press and improve the integrity of the profession. They must see their responsibility as that towards the public rather than the few that seek self aggrandizement through the inherent influence of the mass media.

The general views indicate that journalists and broadcast organizations promote news commercialization which has gone beyond the level of journalists working for the common man on the streets to meeting the demands of the few rich and powerful in the society by projecting their views to the public. To support this view, Atoyebi (2011) asserts that journalists are feared today for the harm they can do but not respected for the roles they play in the society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings above, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. There is need for journalists to be adequately remunerated to avert over dependence on collecting gratification after covering events. According to Adaja (2011:201), for Journalists to perform their “constitutional roles and self-imposed obligations; members of the profession (Journalists) must be adequately remunerated. An average journalist must ‘appear-well’ and ‘feed-well’ to ‘work-well’.
2. News should not be based on the amount of money one has to pay rather, it should be based on the newsworthiness of the event. After all, it is the responsibility of the journalist to watch over the society and report back to the society.
3. Journalists should undergo regular training and re-training to rebuild the trust they entail from the audience
4. The broadcast media can through news bulletin, commentaries, current affairs etc, bring news to the door step of the common man on the streets to regain their confidence and trust once again.
5. There is need for NBC to check on journalism practice from time to time to ensure that they keep to the ethics of the profession.

6. Lastly, broadcast organizations and journalists can do a public opinion poll regularly to know the current views of the audience about the practice of journalism as well as their areas of interest for proper guidance.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Greg Ezeah, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. He has been teaching Mass Communication and Media Studies since 2004 to date. His area of specialization is Public Relations, Advertising and Development Communication.



Jonah, Alice Aladi, lectures in the Department of Mass Communication, The Federal Polytechnic, Bida, Niger State, Nigeria. She is a doctoral student of Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.