

In Media We Trust Versus the Media We Trust: Information Subsidies and Credibility of Editorial Content in Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The mass media serve as the forum for public discussions, political debates and the forging of consensus. However, it has been argued that media efforts to engage, empower and educate audiences are puny owing to several factors such as excessive reliance on public relations contents and well-funded agendas that dominate the media space. Media Studies in many countries have confirmed the growing reliance of journalists on Public Relations (PR) materials—also called information subsidy—but studies in Nigeria have not investigated this phenomenon and its implications for media gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions. The current study was designed to fill this gap. Agenda-setting and Gatekeeping media theories were employed as framework, while mixed methods design was adopted. From two Tier-1 newspapers (*The Guardian* and *Punch*), a total of 1,216 news stories drawn through constructed week sampling from 4-11 January 2016, the year the first Nigerian PR industry report was published, were content analysed. This study confirmed the growing reliance of Nigerian newspapers on information subsidy. This reliance on PR materials weakened the gatekeeping function of Nigerian newspapers, but did not undermine their agenda-setting function as the newspapers devoted their prominent pages (17%) to self-generated contents compared to the volume of materials PR (20.3%) confined to inner and less-prominent pages.

Key Words: Information Subsidy, Agenda Setting, Editorial Content, Nigerian Newspapers, Media Trust

Background and Rationale

The question of whether to trust the news we get from different media arises when the issues of information subsidies, media commercialisation and the relationship between public relations and journalism are brought to the fore. This is because the concept of information subsidy is hinged on the notion that journalists rely on public relations practitioners for contents, which are often packaged as press releases (Gandy, 1982) or what Okuhu (2017) describes as the planting in newspapers and magazines, press releases, without the reporter interrogating the issues raised or look at it from a fresh angle for added value. Answering this critical question, Moloney, Jackson and McQueen (2013), however, maintain a different view by arguing that the traditional answer has been that news organisations are staffed by journalists and editors who are expected to follow a professional practice that produces factual and

accurate reporting after sources are scrutinized, verified, and if necessary, balanced with alternative viewpoints. It can be inferred from Moloney, Jackson and McQueen's position, that the public can trust the news that journalists present to it.

However, the foregoing notion does not seem to reflect the present-day reality as some scholars (Sissons, 2012; Ciboh, 2016; Boumans, 2017; Okuhu, 2017) observed that heavy subsidy received by the media affect the quality of news audience get. A study by Lewis, Williams and Franklin (2008) illustrate that journalists' reliance on contents provided by PR practitioners and news agencies and spokespersons is extensive and raises significant questions concerning claims to journalistic independence in UK news media and journalists' role as a fourth estate. Contextualising

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these claims as it has been observed in Nigeria, Ayeni (2016) and Okuhu (2017) note that there is a predominance of press releases being sold as news in Nigerian newspapers, thus leading to the newsroom losing its quality while PR practitioners are attaining greater control of the media by exploring gaps created by the socio-economic challenges in the newspaper industry. Citing the position of Bryan Appleyard, 'The Sunday Times' journalist, Jenkin (2012:1) observes that "...truth has been destroyed by public relations executives or 'scum' as we like to call them. Power has shifted from the editors to the PRs".

Like Jenkins, other scholars, (Lewis et al, 2008; Rodgers, 2010, Yuna and Yoonb, 2011; Chen, Chen and Chen, 2012, Macnamara, 2012; Macnamara, 2014; Yang, Taylor and Saffer, 2016), posit that the fragmentation of the news industry in recent times, onerous deadline pressures in a relentless 24-hour news cycle, and staffing attrition have contributed to an increased reliance on free, pre-packaged material supplied by the public relations industry which, in contrast, has become well-resourced and a primary sourcing conduit even in 'quality' media organizations. All these affirm the growing concerns about the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists based on categories of relationship satisfaction with contributions made to each other, interdependence, trust and ethical practices. That is, journalists may have outsourced substantial parts of their role as suppliers of the public news diet and shared it—on a daily basis—with another occupation that seeks to influence public opinion on behalf of their pay masters.

Though a symbiotic relationship between Public Relations and journalism has been established, several questions bearing on influence and balance of power continue to emerge in discussions. Review of literature has shown that the news construction process is embodied in a lot of activities with several players trying to influence the process to tilt favourably in their direction. The trend that PR practitioners are attaining greater control of the media and news agenda through information subsidy is a concept which has been explored in some contexts (Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008; Moloney, Jackson and McQueen, 2013; Jackson and Moloney, 2015; Johansson and Oden 2017). These studies affirm international concern about the efficacy of the watchdog function of newspaper journalism following structural changes to the newspaper business model, which traditionally relied on circulation sales and advertising revenue to subsidise journalism. This phenomenon is not

restricted to the media in developed countries. In Nigeria, scholarly works (Adaja, 2012; Asogwa and Asemah, 2012; Dyikuk, 2015; BHM, 2016; Ojebuyi and Kolawole, 2016) focused more on the commoditisation of news due to challenges in the newspaper industry, and noted that trading news as commodity affects media practice in terms of quality of media reports, dominance of PR agenda, and diminishing value of news due to low level of trust in news or media agenda. There is need to move the conversation on to the reality of the nature of operations in both PR and journalism practice. Unlike the Nigerian context where bribes are seen as motivation for the publication of press releases, studies in other contexts identified the use of PR strategies to achieve this objective.

Although it is alleged that Nigerian newspapers are daily heavily subsidised by PR industry (Ayeni, 2016; Ciboh, 2016), the extent to which PR materials received by journalists get published in Nigerian newspapers is yet to be empirically established. Gaps in existing literature show that journalists' gatekeeping powers have yet to be tested to affirm the level of diversity of news from several sources and their choices in gathering, filtering and shaping news messages from PR materials. While motivation for news commercialisation is known, generalising such cause based on individual cases does not affirm the weakness of newspapers' gatekeeping powers. Welbers, Atteveld, Kleinnijenhuis and Ruigrok (2016) in their study in Netherlands suggest document similarity measures to test the extent to which gatekeeping efforts were applied by newspapers in the publication of subsidised contents. While a study by Ciboh (2016) on information subsidies and political pressures in Nigeria explored this relationship, it ignores the flow of PR materials from PR practitioners but focuses only on published political news stories that emanate from PR materials. As a result, existing studies do not provide a basis for stating categorically that the gate-keeping and the agenda-setting powers of Nigerian newspapers have been ceded to PR practitioners. Therefore, the core objective in this study is to investigate the extent and pattern of the utilisation of PR materials by Nigerian newspapers with a view to establishing how such utilisation affect the gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions of the newspapers.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent and pattern of information subsidy utilisation in the selected Nigerian newspapers?

2. How does the use of PR materials affect agenda-setting function of Nigerian newspapers?

Journalism and public relations practice

In their evaluation of the relationship between Public relations (PR) professionals and journalists, Niskala and Hurme (2014) opined that both professions act as builders of societies' communication atmospheres, and their inter-relationships are of importance. To them, the relationship is mutually dependent; PR professionals aim at planting ideas in the media and when resources are decreased, journalists tend to depend on PR material. Within that area of research on professional roles, there are conflicting stances of how journalism ought to be (i.e., journalistic role conception) and how journalism is performed (i.e., how those roles manifest in practice) Hellmeueller and Mellado (2015).

While the functionalist role remains the norm, the relativity of the roles journalists perform is reflected in different contexts. The different levels of influences are related to the autonomy and the power of individual journalists since journalists need autonomy "to exercise independent decisions in doing their work" (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2013:6). For public relations practice, Lahav and Zimand-Sheiner (2016) hold that one tool of PR activity is positive publicity. That is, publicity through media relations is focused on pragmatic relationships with the media. As such, enhancing media relations endows PR practitioners with power especially when these relations are facilitated by journalists' work.

In their exploratory study on the ethical convergence between public relations and journalism, Yang, Taylor and Saffer (2016) explain that the blurry line when exploring the relationship between the two professions lies in the fact that organizations need the independent media to be a foundation of a fully functioning society and the media need information from organizations to better inform the public. Both professions value information and serve the public interest. Directing scholarly inquiry in the direction of relationship between the two professions and how it affects agenda setting power of the media and implications for the audience may provide some fresh ground for interpreting the discourse generated in that context.

Market-driven journalism, competition and era of information subsidy

In their hierarchical model of influences, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) depict the levels through which media content can be influenced prior to reaching the audience. Their research was partially based on White's (1950) seminal gatekeeping study, which examined how a newspaper editor selected or rejected stories for his paper. Although Shoemaker and Reese (1996) outlined many different sources of influence, the research focused on extramedia-level influences, using the following three potential influence measures: advertising, public relations (PR), and influences from political and government officials.

McManus's model of market-driven journalism developed in the 90s expanded Shoemaker and Reese's model by providing an analysis of the various influences on mass media production and on microeconomic theory (Curtin, 1999). The model states that competition and exchange in four distinct markets—for consumers, advertisers, sources, and investors drive news production. The model explained further that such exchanges take place within a cultural, technological, and legal or regulatory environment external to the media, although the external environment and the stages of news production stand in a reciprocal relationship, with influence flowing in both directions. In essence, the media cannot be isolated from influences within the context in which it operates, which further reflects the symbiotic relationship that exists among players involved in the news production activities.

Depending on the environment, there exists a hierarchy of influence among the identified influences. While socio-economic and political factors determine the colouration of the contexts, the need to sustain a business enterprise profitably however makes advertisers and investors rank top influencers rather than consumers and sources in many climes, especially in developing climes like Nigeria. Attesting to this position, Curtin (1999), citing McManus (1994) note that of the four markets, only investors are part of the corporate structure, giving them the most influence on news production as most owners and investors are stockholders. Advertisers are rated as the next most powerful influence on news production because they are the largest revenue producers followed by consumers based on their cost-benefit value while sources rank lowest as they only serve as the supply of information when needed or when such sources seek to inform the public.

However, it becomes worrisome when sources that are supposedly the least in the chain

of influence begin to wield more influence in terms of media content provided by them. Explaining the task before the mass media in a modern democratic society, Lozovina, Jurisc and Lozovina (2013:30) state that the media have a task to select issues and according to their perceived importance, create a certain issue hierarchy. Delegating these responsibilities however let news sources control the traditional agenda-setting role of the mass media that involves both the surveillance and consensus functions of communication (news gathering and aggregation), calling attention to the new and major issues of the day and influencing agreement about what are the priorities of these issues.

The ability of news sources to wield high influence is reinforced by the notion that many of them also wield economic power by not just providing subsidised contents but also providing revenue to the media in form of advertisements and paid contents. With capitalism gaining ground in most parts of the world, the disruptive nature of the business environment in Nigeria and many other countries has led to dynamism in the area of business ownership and operations of such entities. It is now commonplace to find news sources such as public relations practitioners and stakeholders equally acting as advertisers thus influencing contents to be published in the media. Affirming this position, Colistra (2014) adds that various stakeholders who want to promote their agendas confront the media daily with their contents looking to use the media platform and credibility for their own benefit or threaten withdrawal of support through advertisements. Ideally, news organizations provided advertisers with access to difficult and costly to reach mass audiences on the condition that no influence over news content could be wielded. With increased bottom-line pressures, the media have been found to bend to various influences or lose advertising revenue (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Indeed, the need to survive in a difficult economic environment has made media owners to be driven by profitability while neglecting professionalism. Defining the divide between advertising and editorial content, Carlson (2015) notes that news media in the United States – and increasingly the rest of the world – have traditionally occupied a dual role as vehicles of civic information and profit-making. Carlson explained further that “despite the normative rigidity of editorial independence, in practice the forces of commercialism have always compromised journalistic autonomy – inescapably so in primarily for-profit systems” (2015:855).

Other scholars also aligned with this thought as, Lublinski, Spurk, Fleury, Labassi, Mbarga, Nicolas and Rizk (2016) opine that the economic and professional situation in African newsrooms is generally difficult. According to them, media houses have limited means and capacities to support reporters. “Brown-envelope journalism is commonplace. Overall, the pre-conditions are not conducive to investigative journalism (2016: 1080).”

The commercial pressure on the media is captured by Carlson (2015:856) below:

Even if journalists escape concern with revenues, news hierarchies must include managers tasked with both allocative power over newsroom resources and enhancing revenue. Decisions over the provision of resources affecting news content – bureaus, sections/desks, new positions, terminations, technological innovations and so on – are all driven by revenue. Even with structural divides in place, we can surmise that journalists internalize the need to attract audiences – and perhaps to avoid irritating advertisers – in their decision-making.

The submission above further reflects the difficulty experienced by journalists in balancing their social responsibility and agenda setting functions against the need to remain in business. In some Nigerian newspapers, reporters are often times burdened with the challenges of sourcing for advertisements to keep the newspaper afloat and get their salaries paid while equally reporting news and events objectively and accurately.

Adding to the troubles of the traditional media is the advent of new and social media. Indeed, the Internet has drastically changed how information is distributed. Traditional mass media outlets such as television or newspapers no longer function as the primary sources of news. Some works explain that the emergence of the social media has made social media assume a role as a first-line reference for people, who increasingly turn to their online networks as the initial source of information, and then use those same connected media spaces to discuss the news of the day

(Wohn& Bowe, 2016; Matsa& Mitchell, 2014; Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010).

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the media have to be creative in generating contents and remain lucrative as a business or depend heavily on news sources that subsidise information and help them in managing their economies of scale in terms of labour.

Method of Study

The study employed a mixed-method research design including both quantitative and qualitative designs. A content analysis of Nigerian newspapers in 2016 was done. This is because a BHM Survey estimates that around 1,900 press releases are issued per day in Nigeria (2015:42). Therefore, all editions of Nigerian newspapers published within the study period of the first PR report (January 1, 2015 – December 31, 2016) constitute the population for the study. Only printed or hard copy versions of the newspapers were included in the study as it was difficult to access archived online contents of newspapers for a particular day.

In the first phase of the study, qualitative and quantitative content analysis of selected newspapers was done before in-depth interview was conducted with stakeholders in the two industries to affirm or deny trends observed in the course of analysing newspaper contents. The qualitative component (in-depth interview) at the latter phase generated insights to validate or refute the findings of the content analysis. Specifically, in-depth interview with critical policy actors (Newspaper news editors and CEOs of PR firms) was employed. Outcome of the interviews generated data that established the level of information subsidy that was given and enjoyed, how newspapers were being subsidised, as well as recommendations on best measures to address concerns.

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Daily newspapers were purposively selected as cases for the study because they receive more press releases to fill their pages as against the broadcast media that label many of such press releases as commercials. Because of the national nature of news agenda, sectional distribution of news stories was considered in the study. The reason is that politicians, corporate organizations and celebrities form the bulk of issuers of press releases to the news media through PR agencies and consultants. Two tier one newspapers— *The Guardian* and *Punch*, were purposively selected as they are national in focus and equally ranked high

among their peers by PR practitioners. Constructed-week sampling was used to obtain samples of selected newspapers for the study. This is consistent with previous research focusing on traditional media. Constructed week sampling is more efficient than simple random sampling or consecutive day sampling because it selects a sample of seven continuous days, which accounts for the cyclic variation of different days of the week, but ignores between-week differences. It is widely accepted that one constructed week can represent a six-month period for a daily newspaper and two weeks in a year for online newspaper. Hence seven editions (covering the days of the week; January 4 to January 11, 2016) of each of the selected newspapers were analysed.

On account of the findings in the literature review that the growing incorporation of press releases in editorial content could be an avenue for public relations practitioners and their principals to gain wider news access, the researchers developed a quantitative content analysis framework in which some variables were inspired by similar research done by Ciboh (2016), Reich (2010) and Lewis et al (2008). However, because of the different focus (entire news contents), content categories were carefully selected. The most important variables that were coded include newspaper, news items/sections, proportion of the article that is copy-pasted from the press release (part or whole), type of information added by the journalist (facts, context, evaluation, reactions, reports/interviews, nothing added), and attribution (no reference to press release as source, reference to press release as source). See Appendix I for details.

To aid data collection, newspaper contents were subjected to various categorisations. The categories, which are defined operationally, also differentiated different values for distinctiveness. See appendix I for details.

To verify the presence of information subsidies, the pre-test content analysed one week of news coverage (January 4 to January 10, 2015) in *The Guardian Newspaper*. Coders were selected independently among academics conversant with coding procedures to examine the newspapers and code sources according to all defined categories using detailed coder instructions. Coders were helped in describing all measures and in defining category boundaries. Results of initial coding were discussed, and this helped in reducing areas of disagreement and in strengthening poorly defined categories. Coding yielded intercoder reliability coefficients of .79, using Cronbach's Alpha, so the coders agreed on a majority of cases. The units of analysis in this research are words, and phrases

that reflect press statements/press release and other forms of attribution to a source.

Results

To confirm Nigerian newspapers' reliance on information subsidies, all news stories of the two

newspapers were sampled and analysed. This sampling yielded 1,216 news stories from the two newspapers cut across different sections of the newspapers.

Table 1: Distribution of news contents in the two newspapers based on sources

Categories	Newspaper sections						TOTAL
	NEWS/POLITI CS	BUSINE SS	LAW	ARTS	SPORT S	PROPER TY	
			4(1.7%)	15 (6.3%)	18 (8%)	2 (0.8)	336 (20.3%)
Press release Exclusive	128 (54.2%)	69 (29%)	3 (3%)	22 (9%)	22 (6%)	3 (1%)	273 (17%)
Routine events Mix of PR & Exclusive	181 (70%)	80 (17%)	6 (1%)	48 (6%)	25 (6%)	3 (0)	343 (34.8%)
Anonymous	44 (65%)	13 (23%)	0 (0)	0 (9%)	1 (3%)	0 (0)	58 (4.7%)
Agency Report	44 (54%)	10 (5%)	3 (4%)	43 (27%)	20 (11%)	0 (0)	120 (6.5%)
	82 (41%)	28 (16%)	0 (0)	64 (38%)		2 (0)	186 (16.7%)
TOTAL	657	245	16	138	150	10	1216

*Note: Percentage within frequency of themes in brackets
Source: Authors' fieldwork*

With 34.8% of contents generated from routine events and 20.3% from press releases, the content analysis (Table 1) demonstrates that journalists turned to routine events and press releases more often than any other kind of source. Considering the volume of exclusive reports (17%) vis-à-vis other sources, as well as the fact that routine reports and events are often generated by PR practitioners, it may be safe to infer that the media depend heavily on subsidised contents.

From the table above, only 17% of news stories were independently researched and they accounted for the exclusive reports while news agencies, both local and international, contributed at least 16.7% of news stories to newspaper reports within the period under research. Of the news stories analysed, sources of at least 6.5% of the published news stories could not be confirmed as the writers were silent about them. Often times, such stories were largely attributed to anonymous sources. Spontaneous events reported such as protests, armed attacks, suicide bombings were hardly witnessed first-hand by the newspapers as they have to depend on eye-witnesses and police accounts of events.

Overall, the content analysis confirms the high reliance on information subsidies for more than

half of all news in all newspapers for the period. Invariably, journalists rely on pre-packaged news from routine channels/events that government officials and PR practitioners dominate and have considerable control. Much of what came from self-generated or investigative channels was blurred in anonymous sources. This heavy dependence on institutional and anonymous sources suggests PR practitioners who use certain strategies have a high degree of control over what journalists report and how they report it (Bennett 2007).

An understanding of why newspapers are heavily subsidized is presented in a study by BHM (2016) which opines that the need for many politicians, corporate organisations and celebrities to be mentioned in the media has encouraged gratifications and brown envelope journalism as PR practitioners who serve often times as the link, take advantage of poorly remunerated reporters and struggling publishers to fill papers and magazines with promotional content that scarcely catches the interest of the readers. The content analysis done for this study is in line with what has been found by previous researchers that newspapers do not fare well in their social responsibilities and development roles, mainly due

to the marketisation of news to people of influence using PR practitioners as a link (Adaja, 2012; Ige, 2013; Michael and Kayode, 2014; Ciboh, 2016; Ojebuyi and Kolawole, 2016).

A healthy and uncontrolled flow of information and ideas upon which the public can make informed choices is of vital importance for the society. News media play a key role in the circulation of this information. The interviewees, especially PR practitioners agree that agenda-building is not solely a media function. As mentioned by an experienced chief executive at one of the Lagos-based PR firms, news is a collaborative effort. CEO1 observed thus:

The media want news and information; our clients want to protect themselves, their products and services. So, what we try to do is to look for a coincidence of interest. So, first we look for that coincidence of interest that takes cognizance of the fact that the media are looking for news.

As shown above, the media's inability to meet its daily supply of news creates an opportunity for PR practitioners, while representing other interests, to provide subsidies that sometimes form a part of the media agenda. Interviewees hold that motivations of the two groups as being diametrically opposed may be valid, considering that journalists are committed to serving the public interest, whereas most practitioners serve corporate profit goals.

One of the several PR practitioners interviewed claims to have vested interest in the preservation of independent media, claiming that having information about their clients positively reported in respected independent media was more credible and more impactful than publicity in partisan media or saying it themselves through 'owned' media. In CEO2's opinion:

One of the biggest problems that Nigeria faces is that the media have outsourced a lot of its responsibilities to those who are not holding that media space in trust for the public and I cannot stand here to judge them because it is difficult running their businesses in Nigeria. A lot of them are poorly funded and so poorly run. So, they are not able to do the kind of investigations or

make the type of editorial investment that they would have wanted to make. But I will not say that they have solely outsourced their responsibilities to PR agencies, I will say that they have outsourced it to government, media offices across all government, multinationals and corporate organizations; because at the end of the day, he who pays the piper dictates the tune.

In relating the position above to normative ideas about the function of journalism in society, there is a wide consensus (Furlan, 2012; Pavelka, 2014; Hellmeueller and Mellado, 2015) that journalists should aim to build and maintain a diverse media agenda. Ideally, a diverse agenda is desirable because it offers comparable opportunities for social actors (in our case companies, critics, and others) to gain media attention. Yet, building a diverse agenda may be challenged when certain conditions prevail, therefore making the media agenda diffused with prominent interests who have access to the media. Decreasing newsroom capacity, faster (online) news cycles, high levels of competition, declining readership and falling advertising revenues are just some of the challenges that newspapers face these days (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin, 2008; Adaja, 2012). Investors, especially newspaper proprietors have put further pressure on the need for media to be profitable. These pressures are believed to have given rise to news that is cheap to produce because it consists of basically unchanged PR information and therefore promote less journalistic independence, less initiative and less rigorous journalistic efforts (Reich 2010).

While the relationship between Nigerian journalists and PR practitioners have been discovered to be both mutual and beneficial, the agenda building capacity of the subsidies that PR practitioners provide have yet to be examined. When asked whether subsidies provided by PR practitioners aid newspaper production and help to sustain daily operations as claimed by some PR practitioners, one of the editors (E2) has this to say:

It is not totally true. It amounts to self-deceit on their part. Newspapers will survive without PR materials. Our titles are a classic example. For example, the Monday, January 29 edition of our newspaper had

64 pages. 31 of the pages were adverts while the remaining pages had special columns, news, business section, sports and others. Of all the news pages, only about five short stories could be considered as PR. So, without the PR materials, our newspapers titles would not feel it.

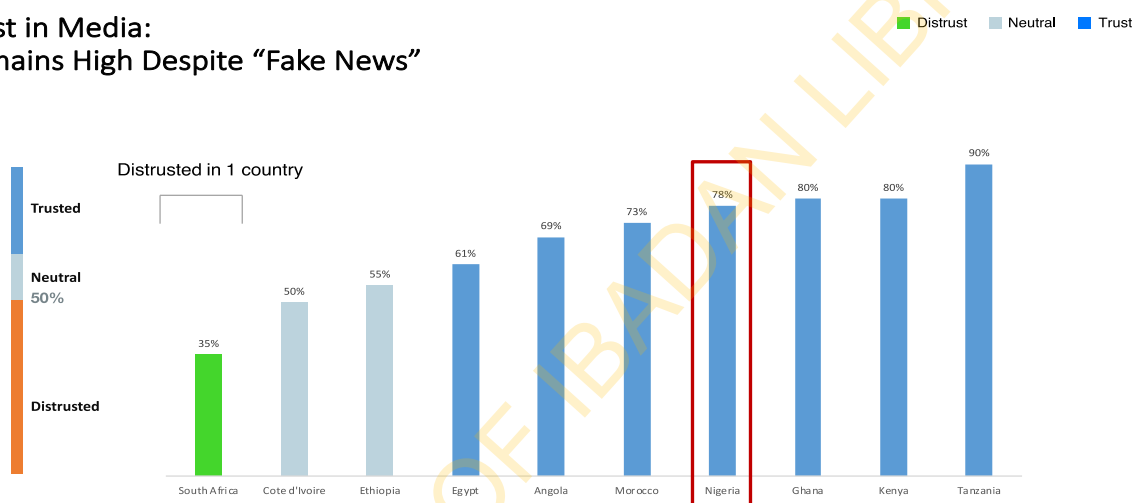
The editor’s position above reflects a case of self-denial while also admitting the challenges in

the newspaper industry. Though the newspaper is ranked as a Tier One newspaper brand and may not feel the pangs of the economic downturn due to its profile, the same may not be said about other newspapers in the country.

Despite the challenges in Nigeria’s newspaper industry, especially as it relates to news sourcing, a trust and credibility survey conducted by Edelman Public Relations firm, has revealed that 78 per cent of Nigerians still trust the media despite the rise of fake news (Edelman: 2018).

Table 2: Edelman Trust Barometer on Nigerian media

**Trust in Media:
Remains High Despite “Fake News”**



Source: 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, TRU_INS, [NGOs IN GENERAL] Below is a list of institutions. For each one, please indicate how much you trust that institution to do what is right using a nine-point scale where one means that you “do not trust them at all” and nine means that you “trust them a great deal.” (Top 4 Box, Trust) General Population, 28-country global total.

However, one of the editors believes that mainstream print media in Nigeria are increasingly losing the trust of the population because of declining circulation. In the view of the editor, the erosion of trust relates directly to the “challenge of revenue,” which has deepened the crisis of ethics in local journalism. Too many believe that traditional media are “in bed with administration and politicians,” he says, leading people to worry that they are not getting all the facts. These concerns affirm the views of one of the CEOs that media agenda should remain salient and devoid of influences if trust will be earned. CEO3 notes:

The PR industry also has a role to play. It is not in the PR’s interest for the newspapers to lose their trust and credibility. What is the essence of placing content where you cannot have access to consumers? It is also not in the interest of the country at large for

the newspapers who should uphold democracy and hold leaders accountable. If they are at the mercy PR, people will just want to fill their pages with commercial editorials so to speak.

From the perspective above, it is apparent that a weak media industry is of no benefit to no one as consumers whom organisations target through their messages may end up being losing faith in media contents and their agenda. The implication painted above is that if an issue does not resonate with the public, it may not appear on the public agenda regardless of its prominence on the media agenda. There are agenda-setting effects of news coverage, but these effects do not inevitably flow from news coverage. The public and the news media are joint participants in the agenda-setting process. Hence, control by some influential members of the public may lead to the media losing its credibility, a trend that has also informed

the rise of citizen journalism. Similarly, a weakened media landscape will eventually lead to weak agenda being projected to the public. Issues of public interest will likely not become the agenda of the day.

With the meanings that are attached to defining contemporary news and newsworthiness, gatekeeping theory refers directly to processes in the newsrooms and news organisations. The gate keeping theory becomes relevant if applied to the approaches taken by media organisations in reporting events. It is recognized that newspapers report similar events all the time but take different approaches and positions to report these events. This arguably is determined by many factors such as social and political biases and economic demands of shareholders, advertisers, audiences and gate keepers' views. Through gate keeping processes, stakeholders are availed opportunities to advance their preferred views even though this is also subject to some limitations. These limitations determine how the agenda is set. However, in situations where information subsidies have been monetised or the gates becoming weak due to several financial constraints, there are concerns for the reading public as only subsidised contents are shared rather than news emanating from rigorous gatekeeping exercises. While agenda-setters seek to influence policies and public opinion and would use the media vehicle to achieve such objectives, the media seek to erect gates to manage influence for fair representation in information dissemination. How such objectives are achieved depends largely on gatekeeping measures and strategies deployed or the level of prominence of influencers in the gate-keeping process. With gates getting porous, considering the volume of information subsidies featuring in daily newspapers, will it be said that the media still set the agenda? The battle for the dominant message, otherwise known as media agenda is one being gradually lost by the media to PR practitioners who have become a major source of news rather than one of the sources of news for journalists.

Conclusion

The content analysis presented above shows that Nigerian newspapers, like their counterparts in other countries, rely heavily on information subsidies provided through formal routine channels availed to them by PR practitioners and consultants appointed by governmental and non-governmental institutions. The daily practice of news production is organized around a beat system that place journalists in close proximity to the privileged few who have access to the media by

the virtue of their institutions or personalities they represent, and therefore provide selective access to formal and informal information subsidies that enable news coverage to align with their interests.

Our findings do, however, raise questions about the operational framework of media business. It would however be unfair to blame journalists for relying on pre-packaged information considering the constraints they face in their day-to-day activity. It is clear that most journalists operate under economic, institutional and organisational constraints which require them to draft and process too many stories for publication to be able to operate with the freedom and independence necessary to work effectively. What is clear from this study is that the quality and independence of the Nigerian news media has been significantly affected by its increasing reliance on public relations and news agency material, even though research affirms audience trust in the media.

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APPENDIX I

Published newspaper items by type

The various sections of the newspaper were identified while news items under each section constituted the total population for the study. Contents under the sections were analysed to establish the amount of press releases incorporated in the course of content generation. The sections included News, Politics, Business, Health, Metro/Crime, Arts, and Sports.

News items by subject focus Sections

This category focused on the various sub-sections identified under types of news contents. Contents under this section formed the total sample for analysis. For instance, an item type like Business, has sub-sections with various subject focus like, Banking, Brands, Industry, Communications and Technology, Energy/Oil and Gas, Labour and Appointments and capital market.

Source of story in newspapers (All from PR, Mix, Anonymity, Agency report)

The samples were assessed to determine the level of incorporation of press releases in them. Data

obtained were used to determine the level of media independence in content generation.

- a. All from PR: These are news stories/contents published from Public Relations sources. They are often described as contents from press statements/press releases.
- b. Exclusive: This category describes contents that were independently generated by the newspaper as a result of research or problem in the society. They are most times devoid of PR materials.
- c. Mix of PR & Exclusive: These are news stories/contents that reflect a mix of other sources aside press statements.
- d. Routine/Events: These are contents generated from accounts of events that happened during the day or a period. Beat reports feature under this category as they are routinely done.
- e. Anonymous: This category describes contents whose sources are not clearly defined or identified. That is, the extent to which a source is marked transparently in the final items by clear attribution.
- f. Agency report: These are contents obtained from news agencies, both from foreign and local media.

Share of voice

Beyond identifying the sources of news, this category examines the news published by looking at the volume of contents from different sources adopted in a news copy. Published news copies were assessed to affirm the level of dependence on other sources rather than independent fact finding and ideas generation.