

Nigeria's Communication Policy and News Determination

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Abstract

National communication policy is not a very popular area of discourse or research among mass communication scholars in Nigeria. Indeed some of them are hardly aware of its existence but it is there and affects overall government attitude and actions toward the mass media. This discursive paper examines the concept of news and the factors that affect its determination. However, its major focus is on how Nigeria's national communication policy seeks to influence what is disseminated as news by the country's mass media. It argues that the policy document as it affects news determination is unnecessary and that it should be reviewed to focus on other critical areas that directly affect journalism practice in Nigeria such as the protection of journalists from exploitative media owners so that the country can have a more vibrant and robust mass media industry.

Keywords: News, Journalism, Communication Policy, Government

1. Introduction

The mass media have become important social institutions because of the crucial roles which they play in modern societies. Such roles have attracted the attention of a wide spectrum of scholars from diverse disciplines which include Sociology, Social Psychology and Political Science. However, the scholar who is generally regarded as the first to articulate the essential roles which the mass media play in contemporary democratic societies was Lasswell (1948) cited in Hanson and Maxcy (1996).

Lasswell, a political scientist stated that the mass media perform three essential functions in any modern society. These are surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of the society in responding to the environment and transmission of social heritage. To these three basic functions, Wright (1959) cited in Hanson and Maxcy (1996) added another crucial function-entertainment.

Surveillance of the environment is achieved through the news dissemination function of the mass media. It is simply the process of collecting and disseminating factual information about the state of the world both within and outside the immediate environment of the mass media institution. This function is achieved mainly through the collection, storage, processing and dissemination of factual reports (news) and pictures.

Some scholars and media observers regard the news dissemination function as the most important function of a free press in a democratic society. This is because news dissemination is a requisite for the smooth functioning of a democratic society. The news dissemination function is perhaps the oldest function associated with the mass media and it is the only function if detached from the overall operation of the mass media is capable of distorting the essence and meaning of journalism. The purpose of this discursive paper is to critically examine the concept of news as the nucleus of journalism, its traditional determinants and how Nigeria's communication policy seeks to determine what is disseminated as news.

2. Conceptual Review

2.1 The concept of news

Although, news is the nucleus of journalism, yet it has no universally accepted definition. This is not surprising because for a concept like news, perception is bound to differ among scholars and practitioners of journalism. This lack of consensus on the definition of news made Akinfeleye (1997), to remark that the definitions of news are as numerous as those that write news. He further points out that although there is yet to be a universally accepted definition of what news is or not, yet when we see or hear the news, we know that it is news and not mango or rice or dialogue.

James Gordon Bennet has been described as "the originator of the art, science and industry of news gathering." He is said to have issued a formula for news reports which is "for the merchant and man of learning as well as the mechanic and man of labour." (Cited in Mencher, 2010:56)

One of the classical definitions of news which is attributed to Charles Dana, who ran the *New York Sun* from 1869 to 1897 states that, "news is anything that interests a large part of the community and has never been brought to its attention before" (cited in Mencher, 2010). One of Dana's editors, John B. Bogart, is said to have contributed another classical definition of news which states that, "When a dog bites a man that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, it's news." According to Dare (1983), going by these two definitions novelty becomes a cardinal element of news and is still of overarching importance in current journalism practice, to the extent that the news media are often said to conduct *journalism of exception*.

Another classical definition of news is that it is the "first rough draft of history." (Bradlee, cited in Boyd, 2009:3).

This obviously implies that news is written in a hurry and it often constitutes the raw material from which history is written.

Similarly, another classical definition of news cited by Evans states that “news is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress, anything else is advertising.” (Cited in Awoyinfa, 2006:35) This definition emphasizes the genre of journalism known as investigative journalism where the reporter uncovers information that somebody or an organization would want to keep from public knowledge. The implication of this definition is that ordinary events such as the outcome of a football match, price movement on the stock exchange or the inauguration of a president or governor and similar events cannot be considered news but advertising.

Another enduring definition of news was offered by Stanley Walker, city editor of *The New York Herald Tribune* in the early 1930s. He stated that news is based on the three w’s: “women, wampum, and wrongdoing”. According to Mencher (2010), by this he meant that news is concerned with sex, money and crime- the topics people secretly desire to read or hear about.

McEwen’s classical definition of news states that it is, “anything that makes a reader say ‘Gee, Whiz!’.” (Cited in Boyd, 2009:36) This implies that news must startle the audience. However, we know that not all news stories in the mass media have the ability to startle the recipients.

Apart from the classical definitions, there are some contemporary definitions of news. One of such definition is that by Glasser, who stated that, “news is a story about changed or changing conditions to which readers can and care to control” (cited in Dare, 1983: 213). Robert Ezra Park defines news as “pubic information which will make people talk and discuss.” (cited in Frazier and Grazino, 2008:19).

The problem with Glasser’s definition is that it assumes an active citizenry that takes the news seriously and is willing and indeed able to do something about issues in the news. This is not always the case. Ezra’s definition also suffers from excessive generality as practically any kind of information can make people talk or discuss.

Ault and Emery define news as the “the report of an event containing timely or hitherto unknown information which has been accurately gathered and written by trained reporters for the purpose of serving the reader, listener or viewers.” (Cited in Dare, 1983: 218). Although this definition has some utility, in this era of i- reports or citizen’s journalism, news stories can sometimes be generated or contributed by active members of the audience who are not necessarily trained reporters.

According to Marro (cited in Awoyinfa, 2006: 35), “news is anything that journalists tell people that they did not already know.” This definition is undoubtedly useful but it is a common fact that print media journalists do report news that their readers may have heard on radio, watched on television or read/seen on the Internet.

After examining various definitions of news, Mencher (2010:58), came up with two definitions of news. The first states that, “news is information about a break from the normal flow of events, an interruption in the expected.” The second is, “news is information people need to make sound decisions about their lives.”

The first definition suggests that anything that disrupts the routine or normal operation of a society is considered to be newsworthy. This implies that only extraordinary occurrences or oddities can make news. While this is certainly true to a large extent, it is nevertheless a fact that these only constitute a minority of what the news media offer as news. The problem with the second definition is that it invests the news with a level of utility that it does not always possess.

Jarney, editor of ITU Regional News in the United Kingdom defines news as “something that happens today that wasn’t the case yesterday. It is a snapshot of how the world changed.” (cited in Awoyinfa, 2006:35).

According to Ahuja and Chhabra (1998:69), “news is not an event, however stupendous, but the report of that event, not the actual happening, but the story or account of the happening which reaches us.”

Akinfeleye (1997:7), states that a school of thought argues that news is an accurate and unbiased account of a timely event that is of human interest to a potential audience – readers, listeners or viewers while others say that news is an account of an event which disrupts the status quo. He therefore submits that news is, “an account of what the public wants to know; what they ought to know; what they must know and (their) right to know - an important aspect of press freedom.” He further explains that news is an account of a timely event or an act of making information common knowledge. It may also be an account of unusual events which must be reported to the public. According to him, an event may make news because of one or a combination of the following imperatives: timelines or immediacy, proximity or nearness to the place of the event; prominence, human and/or animal interest; magnitude as well as consequence of the event.

Another definition of news which attempts to capture the important attributes or determinants of news is that by Okoye (2006:3), which states that, “news is the timely account of an interesting event which the public must know because it is important as it helps them to live their lives meaningfully.”

To Anaeto and Onabajo (2007:20), news is a new piece of information about a significant and recent event that affects newspaper readers, radio listeners and television viewers and is of interest to them. The major problem with this definition is that it does take into account that many people these days get their news from the Internet.

News has been described as both a commodity and a state of mind. As a commodity, news is gathered, processed, published, sold and consumed by the readers, listeners or viewers. As a state of mind, news interests, excites and

holds the attention of the media audience every day of the year. (Alao, 1992:42).

The emotional feelings of human beings are universal. The reader, listener or viewer has emotions and so exposes himself to news stories that appeal to him. News is important to everyone because it satisfies the curiosity and concerns of people and provides people with basic facts that enable them to make up their minds thereby joining in the general discussions that may lead to community action(s).

All the above definitions emphasize the fact that news is the account of an event not the event itself. At any given moment, billions of simultaneous events occur throughout the world but none becomes news until some purveyor of news gives an account of them. When news is defined as the report rather than the event, it means that until the knowledge of the event has been passed from one mind to another, no news exist.

Extension of the above explanation implies three components of news. These are:

- ❖ an event or phenomenon in which some kind of actions occurs;
- ❖ a report describing the action(s) in understandable terms and
- ❖ a reader, listener, viewer or recipient and more likely a group of them to whom the report is offered in print, on air through the Internet.

What is important to note here is that news is based entirely on facts. There is no room for subjectivity or colouring in straight news reporting. Sources are credited and its writing normally follows a conventional pattern – the inverted pyramid style of writing.

According to Agbese (2008:19), news (good or bad) is the business of the news media. The news media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television and thousands of web sites) are established to satisfy the public's hunger for news. He further explains that news is big business and it is the reason why we have large multinational and local media corporations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Radio Nigeria among others.

The news media employ thousands of people and have complex formal structures in place. Some of them are independent and self sustaining while others are publicly financed. Agbese further points out that it is the instant news dissemination that has truly made the world a global village. He explains that news is about people; what they say, what they do or fail to do and what they plan to do and why.

According to Mencher (2010:33), all news stories must be accurate, properly attributed, balanced and fair, objective, brief and focused and well written.

In addition, veteran Nigerian journalist, Tony Momoh (cited in Ajeluorou, 2010:69), adds that:

- ❖ there must be perfect accuracy in news reporting ;
- ❖ when in doubt, leave out and
- ❖ there must be no willful distortion of facts in either news or headlines.

2.2 Types of News Stories

According to Dominick (2012), news stories can be grouped into four broad categories. These are as hard, soft, investigative and interpretative.

Hard (straight) news story typically embodies the first four of the five traditional news values; it consists of the basic five w's and h or who, what, where, when, why and how. It is news of important public events such as government actions, international happenings, social conditions, the economy, crime, the environment and science. Hard news has significance for large numbers of people. Dominick further notes that "the front sections of a newspaper or newsmagazine and the lead stories of a radio or TV newscast are usually filled with hard news." Fedler (2005) notes that hard news usually refers to serious, factual and timely stories about important topics adding that hard news may describe a major crime, fire, automobile accident, speech, labour, dispute or political campaign. Hard news may also be called "spot" or "straight news."

Breaking news is a variant of the hard or straight news story. It was introduced by the Cable News Network (CNN) in the 1980s and it is mostly associated with the electronic media. It represents a paradigm shift from news as the account of an event that has happened to a news event that is happening at the moment the audience (listener or viewer) is seeing or hearing of it. It usually happens during live broadcast of important events.

Soft news or feature covers a wider territory. According to Dominick (2012:305), "the one thing that all soft news has in common is that it interests the audience." Soft news typically relies on human interest for its value. It appeals to people's curiosity, sympathy, skepticism, or amazement. They can be about places, people, animals, topics, events, or products. Fedler (2004:114), adds that the term "soft news" usually refers to feature or human-interest stories. The topics may be odd and unimportant - but never dull. Soft news is written primarily to entertain rather than inform and it appeals mostly to its readers' emotions more than to their intellect.

Investigative stories unearth significant information about matters of public importance through the use of non-routine information gathering methods while interpretative reporting is a step ahead of the hard or straight news story in that it seeks to give meaning and perspective to the hard news story. While the hard news story is a straight, clinical report that gives the reader the facts of the story and leaves him to reach his own conclusion one way or another, the interpretative report lets the reader know the implication of the report for him. (Mudathir, 2010:179)

2.3 Determinants of news

There are certain basic criteria common to all media professionals in determining what events are newsworthy and how to treat such events either on the pages of newspapers and magazines, on the newscast or on the Internet. The page location and the length accorded news items in a newspaper for instance depends on what is commonly referred to as news determinants or values among editors and mass media scholars. According to Metz (2009), news determinants or news values are defined as factors that every experienced reporter or editor considers, consciously or unconsciously, in deciding what to include in a story or in a newspaper or a newscast. They are qualities of news but they do not directly define news itself.

Generally, news determinants are used to evaluate stories to be published. News stories that do not meet the requirements of these journalistic values or determinants stand the risk of being ‘killed’ or discarded in mainstream media.

The five traditional rules of the thumb that help every reporter or editor decide what event is news worthy for inclusion in the news pages or news cast are: timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence and human interest.

Timeliness has to do with events that are immediate and recent. The daily newspaper and the hourly, half hourly or ‘breaking news’ newscast seeks to keep readers and listeners abreast of latest events. It is for this reason that the broadcast news is mostly written in the present tense and most newspaper leads or “intros” contain the word *today*. According to Mencher (2010), no matter how significant the event, how important the people involved, news value diminishes with time.

Timeliness is of utmost importance to the broadcast media as well as newspapers. In the current globalised environment, no media organization can afford to serve its audience with stale news. Thus, if an event is current, its news value increases because readers, viewers and listeners want the news served fresh and hot. The influence of global broadcast news channels like the Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Al Jazeera and the Internet has made availability of news as it breaks a major determinant of a good news media organization. Timeliness as a news value implies that people are interested in stories that are current and have a sense of immediacy; it has to do with the newness or recency of the news. Readers are interested in what is happening or what is about to happen or has happened. They want to be the first to know.

Proximity means nearness and it has to do with events geographically or emotionally close to the reader, viewer or listener. The proximity factor is hinged on the fact that people are interested in and affected by activities close at hand. Proximity as a news determinant emphasizes the closeness of an event to the media’s audience. Thus the nearer an event is to the people, the more eager they are to know about it. People are interested in what happens in their immediate vicinity, neighbourhood, local government area, state (regional) national and international arena.

Prominence has to do with events involving well known people or institutions. “Names make news” goes the popular journalistic adage, even when the event is of little consequence. The person in the news especially if he is a prominent personality in the community is a critical important factor to be considered by any journalist in writing the news. Celebrities, politicians, royalty, and corporate executives are all prominent and well-known figures which, when involved in a story, make it more newsworthy. This simply implies that media audiences are interested in things and people that are popular and familiar to them. They desire information about celebrities, stars, top politicians, personalities and places of great importance.

Consequence has to do with impact or events that are likely to affect many people. Here, the journalist talks about the importance of events, or the kinds of information that will interest people or that which the journalist decides people need to know to be informed. The consequence or impact an event has on the people, community, nation or even the world is a major determinant of its news worthiness. This is more important in the current globalized world where countries are becoming more interdependent more than ever before. People are usually interested in knowing the result of an event or issue; they want to know how many people are affected by the event or issue.

Human interest stories have to do with reports that arouse emotions in the reader or that evoke an emotional response. In this case, timelines is often not a critical factor as a news determinant. Human interest stories are intended to affect the reader’s feelings and sensibilities in some ways. They are usually woven around such themes are surprise, oddity, drama and conflict.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the gatekeeping theory as its theoretical framework. According to Roberts (2005) this theory is the “vanilla ice cream of mass communication theory.” This is because though it may not be every mass communication researcher’s favourite, yet nearly every one of them can tolerate it. Also, while it may have an unremarkable flavor, it serves as a building block of other theories and methodological approaches.

The basic assumption of this theory which was propounded long before the advent of the Internet is that no mainstream media organization can transmit all reports it receives in the course of a day’s routine. Some

individuals have to decide which information to transmit, which to defer, which to modify and which to delete entirely. Such individuals as it were, open and shut the “gate” that stands between the information source and the recipients. Gatekeeping, however, is not just restricted to just accepting and rejecting of information but also involves shaping (editing), display, timing, repeating the messages for emphasis and so on. (Folarin, 2002:95).

Similarly, Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008:91) explain that the main principle of the gatekeeping theory is that mass media organizations as well as key media professionals act as gates to the flood of information coming in from the larger society. The gates can either be opened-to let some kinds of information through for processing and publication or shut-to deny other kinds of information the opportunity for processing and publication.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) further explain that gatekeeping is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited messages that reach people every day and it is the centre of the media’s role in public life. The process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of the messages such as news will be. They further explain the gatekeeping process as follows:

- (1) In exercising its “surveillance” function, every news medium has a very large number of stories brought to its attention daily by reporters, wire services, and a variety of other sources.
- (2) Due to a number of practical considerations, only a limited amount of time or space is available in any medium for its daily presentation of the news to its audience. The remaining space must be devoted to advertising and other content.
- (3) Within any news organization there exists a new perspective, a subculture that includes a complex set of criteria for judging a particular news story – criteria based on economic needs of the medium, organizational policy, definition of newsworthiness, conception of the nature of relevant audience, and belief about fourth estate obligations of journalists.
- (4) This news perspective and its complex criteria are used by editors, news directors, and other personnel who select a limited number of news stories for presentation to the public and encode them in ways such that the requirements of the medium and the tastes of the audience are met.
- (5) Therefore some personnel in the news organization become “gatekeepers”, letting some stories pass through the system but keeping others out, thus limiting, controlling, and shaping the public’s knowledge of the totality of actual events occurring in reality.

The gatekeeping theory was first alluded to by Robert Park in 1922 when he stated in an article that of all the events that happen and recorded everyday by journalists, the editor chooses certain items for publication which he regards as more important or more interesting than others. The remainder he condemns to oblivion and the wastebasket (cited in *Wikipedia*, 2013).

However, Lewin (1943) formally stated the gatekeeping theory when he used the term to describe individuals who control food channels and use within groups during the World War II and later to describe those who generally control transmission of media fare. (Cited in Folarin, 2002).

According to the *Wikipedia* (2013), the theory was officially applied to news in 1950 when White examined the factors an editor takes into consideration when deciding which news will make the paper and which will not. He suggested that the journalist acts as a gatekeeper of media content and his conclusion that the journalist was subjective in his news judgement led to a long line of research examining the role of gatekeeper in the news production process.

In 2001, Shoemaker and her colleagues studied the forces in news gathering in relation to coverage of congressional bills in the United States of America. They found that news worthiness had a significant effect on the amount of coverage given to a bill and that the idea of news worthiness would be more important than personal characteristics.

According to the *Wikipedia* (2013) while Shoemaker and her colleagues’ study focused on traditional newsroom, Singer studied how gatekeeping translates to traditional newspapers use of online tools. She studied how the Internet changed the process for newspapers during the 2000 and 2004 US Presidential elections and asserted that “the power of the gatekeeper seems to diminish in a modern information society.” According to her, the Internet defies the whole notion of a gate and challenges the idea that journalists (or anyone else) can or should limit what passes through it. However, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) has proposed a new way of looking at gatekeeping, merging the disciplines of communication, information science and management perspective into a refined theory of gatekeeping referred to as the theory of network gatekeeping.

Roberts (2005) points out that the chief value of the gatekeeping theory comes in summarizing the various forces that come into play as news people make decisions about what messages will be selected to present to their audiences. Its major weakness, however, is that it is fundamentally a descriptive theory with a normative bent that offers little if any predictive power.

4. Communication Policy and News Content

In addition to the traditional determination of news, media ownership is also known to influence journalists’

selection, treatment and placement of news. Generally, there are two broad types of mass media ownership. These are state (public) and private. State or government ownership can be direct or indirect. Direct state ownership is where the media institution is owned, funded and controlled directly by the government while indirect ownership involves the media organization being overseen by a Board of Governors. While the former model applies to a public media organization like the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) the latter model applies to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) which although has a board appointed by the British government, is virtually free from both state and other political controls. On the other hand, private ownership of the media could be by individuals, families, companies and conglomerates.

Media owners do strive to exercise some form of control over editorial contents be it news, features or editorial comments. The major mechanism for accomplishing control over editorial content by media owners is the recruitment of carefully selected editors to drive the vision and mission of media owners. Such editors that have successfully executed the mission and vision of the media owners are usually rewarded with promotions and financial incentives. However, in some cases, media owners may interfere directly in the determination of editorial content through reshuffling of editorial staff, reworking as well as killing or stoppage of stories from being published.

It has been asserted that information is power. This implies that the capacity of an individual to act or take rational decisions is to a large extent dependent on information available to him. The major sources of information to most people today are the mass media. As a result of this perceived influence of the mass media, several national governments have stepped in to influence news selection and dissemination through the mechanism of national communication policy.

The above notwithstanding communication policy like the concept of news has no single universally accepted definition. It has been defined from different perspectives.

The first “official” definition of communication policy from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that communication policies are a set of principles and norms established to guide the behavior of communication systems. Their orientation is fundamental and long range although they may have operational implications of short-range significance. They are shaped in the context of society’s general approach to communication (UNESCO, 1972:8).

Sarikakis [2010] defines communication policy as the general principles which guide decisions of authorities usually governments, about the functions of mass media industries; matters of technical infrastructure and technological developments; the relationship of the media with authorities and the market.

Another definition of communication policy offered by Beltran (cited in Viso and Orts 2012:5) states that it is “an integrated, explicit and durable set of partial policies organized into a consistent body of behavior principles and norms for a country’s communication activities or processes.” According to Braid et al (1990), communication policy refers to the guidelines on ownership, distribution and utilization of communication resources; define the relationship between media, government and business; provide the framework by which the present structures may be transformed so that they can support the goals of building a just and humane society.

According to UNESCO (1979), communication policies are shaped over time in the context of society’s general approach to communication and the media. They emanate from political ideologies, the social, economic, cultural conditions of a country and from the values on which they are based; they strive to relate these to the real needs for and the prospective opportunities of communication. UNESCO further explains that communication policies exist in every society, though they may sometimes be latent and disjointed, rather than clearly articulated and harmonized in a single document. They may be general, in the nature of desirable goals and principles or they may be more specific and practically binding. Similarly, they may be incorporated in a country’s Constitution or its legislations in overall national policies in the guidelines for individual administration and in professional codes of ethics as well as in the constitution and operational rules of specific media institutions.

Communication policies may be either implicit or explicit. They may also be dispersed through various institutions and institutional norms or they may be centralized and concentrated. Most countries follow certain unwritten communication policies, which are the sum total of several decisions taken at different times and at different levels and few countries have explicit communication policies.

Sarikakis (2010) explains that national communication policy involves the study of decisions regulating (or not regulating) media content such as the broadcast of pornographic material or violence on day time television; decisions that organize the media into public and private organizations depending on the forms of ownership and those that guarantee or restrict the freedom associated with expression, whether artistic or journalistic. Furthermore, media policy refers to the set of norms and institutions that administer or manage the rights and obligations of media professionals and organizations aimed at maintaining journalistic ethics, advertising standards and generally by self-regulating the relationships of the media with their publics.

Communication policy is usually made by national governments. However, it can also be made by international institutions such as the African Union or European Union or international organization of professions and

industries. Communication policy also expands to cover all the processes of policy making which involves actors and institutions as well as the set of values and beliefs that underlie the justification of certain decisions.

.Communication policy in developing countries is said to have emerged when UNESCO'S concern for communication and development led its researchers to focus on who governs and controls the media, whose interest they serve, what resources they use, the nature of their products among others. It was these factors that led UNESCO to issue the earlier mentioned "first official" definition of communication policy in 1972.

According to Boafo (1986), a national communication policy enunciates the goals, objectives and functions of communication systems and aims at dovetailing these with the overall socio-economic, cultural and political climate of the society. A national communication policy determines the context and objectives of communication planning which articulates and embodies policies. In essence, the principal purpose of a national communication policy is to provide a favourable framework within which communication systems and technologies can be developed and utilized in a coordinated, consistent and systematic manner for the benefit of society.

5. Nigeria's Communication Policy and Mass Media News Content

Nigeria's national communication policy document first emerged in 1990. It was the product of a one week seminar organized by the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture in collaboration with a highly dedicated interdisciplinary group of intellectuals, professionals, practitioners and administrators in all core related and supportive fields of mass communication. It has a chapter devoted to the philosophy and objectives of the policy. Other chapters deal with various aspects of the media of mass communication in Nigeria. The policy document which was later reviewed in 2004 stipulates the following guidelines for news determination in the print media:

- The national interest of Nigeria shall in all circumstances and at all times guide the definition of news;
- The print media shall focus on the development process going on in the country
- The print media shall in their coverage of foreign events demonstrate due sensitivity to our aspirations as a people and our efforts to develop;
- The print media shall be used as a vehicle for national mobilization in support of policies and programmes aimed at improving the standard of living of Nigerians raising the level of their consciousness and protection and defence of the national interest.
- The print media shall champion and enhance the positive aspects of our natural resources, image, corporate unity and stability

One way of analyzing the above national policy guidelines concerning news determination is that they reflect the notion of development media theory which stipulates that the mass media are to be utilized by the government to promote a country's social and economic development goals and to direct a sense of national purpose. Also implied in this notion of development media is that the press should refrain from criticizing the government but become partners in development. The policy document also stipulates similar guidelines for the electronic media content adding that "...to ensure the regular presentation and delivery of accurate information to the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a cardinal policy objective of the electronic media".

Another expression of Nigeria's communication policy with regards to news determination is found in the editorial policy of the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) which states inter alia:

"News and comments emanating from the News Agency of Nigeria must be truthful, honest and fair, but must not jeopardize peace and harmony in the country."

When a government prescribes criteria for news determination by way of a national communication policy, there are certain wrong assumptions that go with such a prescription. The first is that news is no longer a factual report of an event but a jaundiced report representing the slant or point of view of the government in power. Secondly, it assumes that all mass media organizations are publicly owned and operated by government agencies. Thirdly, it fails to recognize that privately owned media organizations are mostly commercial enterprises set up to make profit for their proprietors or investors. As profit driven enterprises, the needs of customers are always paramount. Jaundiced news reports cannot meet the needs of customers in a highly competitive media environment that we have today.

Another implication of government's prescription for news determination is that the mass media as partners in the development process must refrain from reporting negative stories as that negate the notion of development. Thus, bad news like stories of bombings and killings by the Boko Haram Islamic sect, kidnappings, armed robbery, and official corruption among others must be kept off the media.

Similarly, going by this prescription reporting that Nigeria's ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party in 2013 broke up into two factions may be considered antithetical to the notion of development media. The media must only report stories that enhance or promote the development process from the government's perspective. This will only rekindle the good and bad news debate. Indeed, the good and bad news debate has been on for quite some time but was recently rekindled by Governor Raji Fashola of Lagos State when he told the Nigerian Guild of Editors that a patently bad event can be reported just as bad or not so bad. He then advised them that for instance, instead of reporting that "Robbers kill police officer" could be reported as "Policeman dies fighting

robbers.” (Cited in Ojebode, 2008:67).

According to Ojebode, the ascendancy of bad over good news is driven by profit motivation. He further explains that when the commercial takes over the professional imperative, the mass media in the process squander the trust that people have in them as institutions that exist to protect their interests as watchdogs of the society.

He also points out the consequences of the media reporting too much of bad news. According to him, when audience members are constantly inundated with media violence and bad news, they get to a point when they lose sensitivity to such news as it no longer means anything to them.

There is also the danger of the mass media igniting and promoting civic cynicism which means citizens accepting that nothing is working and that society has collapsed. According to him:

When the pages of the papers are filled with tales of woe, stories of official misconduct and the general picture of a failing system, what is the logical consequence? Everyone concludes that nothing is working, the system has failed. (Ojebode, 2008:67)

Journalists have reacted to the above viewpoint by stating that the nature of news is such that the bad tends to sell better than the good one. People for instance preferred to read of Michael Jackson’s death than that of German Chancellor, Angela Meckel when she visited the United State of America on June 25, 2009.

The story is told of an American publisher some decades ago who felt that American newspapers published too much of bad news. He then decided to float a newspaper that published only good news. Within a few months the paper was defunct!

According to veteran Nigerian journalist, Ray Ekpu, newspapers with bad news sell better than those purveying only good news. He further explains that news is business, not a free gift and as such people buy only that which interests and appeals to them. Explaining further, he stated that the press offers the society what it wants adding that a crucial question that a news reporter asks is: “Will the public be interested in buying this news story? Will they buy it when it is published?” (Cited in Ojebode, 2008:67),

It has also been pointed out that the mass media are only a reflection of reality. In other words, they only report events that occur in society. It stands to reason therefore that if there are more bad events that occur in society, there is nothing that the media can do than to report same. Similarly, since privately owned media must make profit to remain in business, it is only logical that they give their consumers what they will like to spend their money on. This is just simple business logic. The media cannot shy away from reporting bad events when they occur. Doing so will be tantamount to unnecessary censorship. However, the media must learn to be objective reflectors of society. That means that the editors should be able to strike a balance between the coverage of good and bad events in the mass media.

Another way of interpreting or analyzing this section of the national communication policy document is that it is an indirect form of official censorship meant to curtail press freedom in Nigeria. Ejejiibe (2009) puts it succinctly when he states that freedom of the press in a democratic society is about how much the press can control professionally its own operations of generating information, processing and disseminating it. He adds that any attempt by anyone to interfere with any of the three stages of collecting, processing and disseminating information amounts to censorship.

6. Recommendations for Policy Review

In view of the above discourse, there is the need for another review of the national communication policy document. In the first place, the policy document should refrain from dabbling into the criteria for news determination as this a professional issue which should be left for mass media professionals to handle. There are enough safeguards in our statutes and professional codes of ethics to guard against journalistic excesses and recklessness. Indeed a national communication policy that dabbles into this core area of journalistic practice diminishes its essence because of the difficulty in enforcing such a policy. It should be noted that the failure of the *Post* newspapers established by the Federal Government during the First Republic has been attributed in part to government interference in their editorial contents.

In reviewing the existing national communication policy, emphasis should be placed on the protection of journalists from the hands of unscrupulous media owners. Perhaps, one of the greatest problems of journalistic practice in Nigeria today is that of irresponsible or exploitative employers who treat journalists’ welfare with levity. According to Solanke (2013) the salary earned by most Nigerian journalists today is pittance and irregular. This accounts for the high turnover in the profession as reporters and editors jump from print to broadcast media, public relations and other sectors where they can earn decent and regular wages. This is unfortunate for apart from being a stressful job full of hazards, journalism saps youthful energy mentally and physically yet most Nigerian media owners hardly give any serious consideration to provisions for pension and gratuity for journalists. It is therefore likely that journalists who work under such conditions can easily be compromised by people with pecuniary means. This is unhealthy for journalism practice anywhere in the world as the output of such practitioners cannot be worth the platform on which it is disseminated. The policy document therefore

should stipulate some sanctions for such unscrupulous media owners who employ journalists and treat their welfare issues with levity. Similarly, due to the hazards associated with journalism practice in Nigeria, the policy document should stipulate among other things provision of life insurance cover for all journalists working in mass media organizations. Any media owner who cannot provide such should not even be allowed to open shop in the first place.

In addition to the above, the national communication policy document should stipulate minimum standards and qualifications for entry into the journalism profession in Nigeria. The situation where the profession is still an all comers affair after over 150 years is unacceptable. There should also be acceptable minimum conditions of service to be guaranteed by potential media owners in the policy document. Furthermore, it should emphasize the importance of press freedom for the smooth functioning of our democratic institutions. Undue interference by media owners in editorial matters should be discouraged in the policy document. However, the document should encourage media organizations to strengthen internal mechanisms to check excesses of media professionals.

These are some of the key areas which the national communication policy should address and not criteria for news determination which lie squarely in the purview of media professionals. As aptly noted by Okunna (2004) one cardinal value cherished by journalists everywhere in the world has to do with the need for the news content of the media to be the responsibility of professional journalists. Thus, although media owners should exercise their constitutional right to own, establish and operate mass media without interference, they should accept that the content of news is one which a professional journalist must decide.

7. Conclusion

It is obvious from the gatekeeping perspective that media professionals particularly editors have the onerous responsibility of determining editorial contents in mainstream mass media. They have the professional competence to manage such matters. When media owners directly interfere in editorial issues, it runs contrary to the ideals of a free press in a democratic society. A news medium should be allowed by its owner to function as a trusted and reliable information source that people can rely on. The model of the late publisher of *The Guardian*, Mr. Alex Ibru, who gave journalists that worked for him what is considered the most prized possession of journalism practice—freedom of journalists to ply their trade while he concerned himself mainly with bottom line issues is worthy of emulation by other mass media owners in Nigeria.

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