IMPLICATIONS OF MASS MEDIA CENSORSHIP ON THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT
The paper examined the implications of mass media censorship (scrutiny) on the individual and the Nigerian public. The paper discussed the two main types of censorship, self-censorship and government censorship. Cases of media censorship in the Nigeria contemporary society revealed that censorship by the government was usually accompanied by stiff penalties such as imprisonment, proscription of press houses and even death of the journalist. The study revealed that media audience in Nigeria are denied useful information that may help them in making informed decisions. The middle and upper classes are therefore compelled to source their information need from international media. The negative impact of this exposure to foreign media on the individual and other family members cannot be overlooked. Mass media censorship has negative and positive effects on the individual and the Nigerian public.

INTRODUCTION
Throughout history, human beings have always sought to improve on their ability to receive and assimilate information about their surroundings. This is one nature of man that distinguishes him from other animals. Man's quest for information necessitates knowledge of activities taking place in his immediate and remote environments. Censorship has been used to limit the availability of certain information to the public. Where there is little or absence of certain information through the mass media or other media it becomes impossible for man to take well informed decisions. The reasons adduced for censorship of the mass media and its implications on the individual and the society at large will be x-rayed in this paper.

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THE MASS MEDIA.

Mass communication is the transmission of messages to a huge audience through artificial channels or machines called the mass media. The mass media according to Nwosu (1998) are the agents of mass communication. They are the channels through which mass communication is done. Okunna et al (2001) defined a mass medium as "an intermediate transmitter of information that reaches the members of the audience simultaneously." A medium is regarded as mass medium if it meets two basic requirements. It must reach many people simultaneously (at the same time) and it must use a technological device located between source and receiver (Whetmore 1985).

A simple approach to the classification of the mass media is to group them under print or broadcast (electronic) media. The print media are such mass media as books, newspapers and magazines, whose basis is the printed word. Electronic media include all the mass media which rely on electric power to get their messages to their audience. These are the radio and television (Okunna, 1999). The internet is also an electronic medium.

The print media are characterized by their permanence, literate technology and special mental demand. By permanence of the print media we imply that the print media messages are frozen in words and pictures and can be revisited at any time. Literate technology of the print media means that the target audience has to be literate enough to understand the print messages. The special mental demand implies that print media readers need to concentrate and not be distracted in order to extract the message in printed communication.

The electronic media on the other hand are characterized by transience, limited airtime and limited mental demand Okunna et. al., (2002). The transient nature of the broadcast media implies that once broadcast, the message perishes until it is broadcast again. Limited airtime in electronic media implies that there is limited time for programmes in broadcast media. Electronic media also exert limited mental demand on the listener. Limited mental demand explains why one can be engaged in one form of work while listening to the broadcast message. It also explains the popularity of televisions.

The mass media are persuasive and pervasive in nature. The mass media package their information in such a way as to influence the audience positively or negatively and persuade them on a particular point of view. This is achieved through the use of particular words, phrase, standpoints, and slants to create impact. The pervasive nature of the mass media on the other hand involves the purposive deviation of the media message from accepted or expected behaviour or opinions. It involves the use of the mass media in bombarding the audience with information that most of the time is not socially acceptable. This is attributed to the growth in information technology and exposure to foreign media contents especially through the Internet.

The mass media are known to affect the behaviour of the audience.
mass media is like a bullet. “It has immediate and powerful effect on her audience, persuading her to behave exactly the way the message advocated” (Okunna, 1999).

According to Ikem Nwosu (1998) the mass media also affect the government by defining and redefining government policies and laws, creating change and shift, entrenching and retrenching government and building a more aware leadership. The mass media and government are partners in progress. They benefit each other mutually and one cannot do without the other.

**CENSORSHIP**

Censorship according to the *New Webster's Dictionary* (1981) is the “process of repressing from the consciousness those impulses which will be upsetting to it. It is prior restraint or suppression of communication by government”. Hiebert et al., (1988).

The history of censorship in mass communication could be traced back to the authoritarian period of the ruling monarchies in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The authoritarian theory explains the press in existence then. In this theory, human beings were viewed as subservient to the state and as instruments of the state's natural, if not divine, right to maintain order and further the state's existence Bittner 1989). The press in such society is viewed as an instrument for disseminating the state's position to the populace, informing the populace what is right and wrong based on the state's interpretations of issues and providing official policy statements of the ruling elite. Bittner went on to say that “whoever owned the press was of equal importance as how the press was used”. The private sector was permitted to own the press, but the sector contained only wealthy friends of the crown who did not abuse their ownership privilege by criticizing it. Later government use of the media implication of media censorship on the society spawned various official journals that echoed the government line. Eventually, other private media joined these government media. The difficulty at that time was how to control the private press. The control took various forms, of which one of them was censorship.


There are two types of censorship: pre-censorship and post-censorship. Pre-censorship involves a situation where materials were read and approved before publication while post censorship entails the reading and approval of press content after publication before it was distributed. Post censorship was the main vehicle of government control. Sandman et al., as quoted in Okunna, (1999) explaining how this system of control worked said that “printers could publish anything they liked. Eventually the government got around to reading it, and if the government didn't like what it read, that was the end of that printer. Stiff fines, long jail sentences and occasionally even death were the penalties for a seditious publication. The mere threat of these punishments was enough to keep most printers in line”.

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Censorship can also be carried out through self-censorship. This is done by the media man /journalist or by the organisation itself in the form of pressure which could either be internal or external pressure. Editorial policy of the organisation is also a form of self-censorship by the organization.

Self-censorship is a situation whereby the journalist employs certain measures in the course of carrying out his responsibility to make him discharge his duties responsibly. Self censorship became necessary to check the excesses of the Libertarian theory where the journalist abused the extreme freedom which was given to him, thereby resulting in the press being irresponsible and the victim of a number of negative practices which culminated in yellow journalism, characterised by sensationalism, irresponsibility and character assassination Okunna (1999). Self-censorship therefore entails that the journalist should put in place certain measures that are designed to make them responsible in the discharge of their professional duties Okunna (1999). This is known as self-regulatory mechanisms, which revolve around the concept of ethics in journalism. Self-control of the media in Nigeria and elsewhere functions through professional codes and ethical standards Ezeukwu and Nwanze (1998).

Media censorship by the organisation can also be carried out in form of pressure. Pressure, according to Okunna (1995) is “any force or influence, which causes a journalist to feel strongly compelled to act in a manner desirable to the source of such force or influence”. Furthermore, pressure could be either internal or external pressure. Internal pressure emanates from within the organisation in which the journalist works could be seen in a situation where the publisher of a newspaper pressurizes an editor to write an editorial in a particular way, or even request the editor to publish a “canned” editorial written by the publisher or his or her surrogate. External pressure, on the other hand, comes from the wider community or society. Advertisers, politicians, or even friends and families of journalists can constitute sources of this type of pressure. Okunna, (1995). The use of pressure as a type of media censorship has the tendency of making the journalist to be irresponsible or unethical because the source of the pressure compels the journalist to carry out actions that are contrary to journalistic ethical principles. The source of the pressure may possess the ability to punish the journalist either physically or psychologically if his or her request is turned down. The journalist through the editorial policy of the media organisation can be censored. This is a situation whereby every media organisation has certain policies governing the operations of the media house. The effect of this editorial policy is that what may be acceptable in a newspaper organisation may not be acceptable in another newspaper. This therefore acts as a check on how the journalist operates in his organisation. The journalist's stories, the style of his writing, the language employed in writing and all the mances of newspaper writing must be in line with the editorial policy governing his organisation. This means that anything that is not in conformity with the editorial policy of the media organisation will be unacceptable and inviolably will not be
The media is viewed with suspicion by the government. The media is also seen as an adversary. This is because the media practitioners have perpetually being in struggle with the government, they are always willing to ridicule the government. This point of view seems to be justified considering the fact that many governments had been overthrown through pen power. Thus those in government have always felt that the pen was mightier.

Reasons for Government Censorship of the Media

A lot of reason abound why the government censors the media. Some of these reasons according to Nwosu (1998) ranges from; concept of fair play, check on freedom of the press, right to rebuttal, the developing country concept and to enhance national unity. We shall look at these reasons one after the other.

(a) Concept of fair play

A few rich or influential interest groups control the media. This has resulted in the media being used by publishers and writers in denigrating fellow citizens, government and groups. Because of the hue and cry over this by the citizenry and government functionaries, government insists that the media should enforce the concept of fair play by being objective and allow the exposure of different opinions on issues that affect the society's or citizen's very existence.

(b) Check on freedom of the press

One of the basic functions of the media is the freedom to disseminate information, which invariably has the tendency of influencing the opinion of the audience towards actions. To the end, the government acts as a check towards this freedom to be carried out with some level of responsibility so that the media will not abuse this privilege.

(c) Right to rebuttal

Every individual has a right to the press. This right should be exercised by giving the individual a chance to defend himself against allegations, express his views, attack or be attacked. Where these rights are not operational, it might result in a situation of journalistic authoritarianism, which may be detrimental to peace. Thus, right of rebuttal will afford the individual an opportunity to reply to allegations. Moreover, where there is no free access to the media, the government ensures the citizen's right to rebuttal.

(d) The developing country concept

One of the indices of a developing country is illiteracy. Illiterates are considered as not right thinking. This affects their attitude towards issues, developments and controversy. The government believe that this peasantry is helpless in the hand of the powerful media owner, who could bombard them with truths, half-truths, pernicious propaganda or misinformation. This could create a crisis situation for it. Government has thus reasoned that only its involvement in the media and its control of a part of the media could forestall such a situation.
(e) Enhancement of national unity

The heterogeneous nature of Nigeria as an entity involves various peoples, nationalities, religions and social groupings. These diverse groups have different cultural settings and slants. This has resulted in a situation where the very existence of man is threatened through genocide, fratricide, civil strife, hate and rancour. Also the religions practised by unrepentant and often ignorant fanatics, who are always at each others neck and the media man who slants towards particular schools of thought, and often hostile to the disadvantage. Because of this, government has decided that its periodic check on the press and what it brands sensitive matters would help protect the sovereignty and enhance the unity of our various peoples.

Means of Government Censorship of the Media

The fact that government decided that there are reasons for controlling the media, triggered off ways of consummating the act. Some of the means of media control by the government include:

(a) Licensing

Government ensure that newspapers, radio stations or magazines are licensed before they are commissioned. This in the authoritarian system was referred to as the “patent system”. Okunna, (1999) explains that “government issued licences or patents or permits to individuals to own the press privately. Anybody who did not posses a licence was not allowed to publish. Through this method of control, only wealthy friends of the government, whom it was obvious would not criticize the government, were given licences, thus effectively bringing the private media under the control of the government as was the case with their government-owned counterparts”.

(b) Ban on reporting

This is calculated to halt the leakage of secrets and the preservation or protection of classified issue. This is seen in laws of sedition and official secrets act. Ban may also be placed on publication of parliamentary materials, security issues, judicial matters and other sensitive matters that border on security in the eyes of government Nwosu, (1998).

(c) Laws, decrees and edicts

This is also known as legal control. This was also employed under authoritarianism as a method of government repression of the press. “People who printed materials, which were unfavourable to the government, were tried for sedition or treason. If found guilty, which was invariably the case, such people could face a punishment as terrible as death for sedition. They could also be put away in prisons for very long periods; their least punishment was the payment of fines, which were as stiff as the government could make them. Okunna, (1999).

(d) Appointment of editorial staff by government

This involved the imposition of personnel on the mass media houses to edit scripts and broadcast materials before publication and transmission to the audience.
This was exemplified during late Sani Abacha's era with the Daily times newspaper.

(e) Suspension of publication

This involved a situation where publishing establishments were closed down. Such cases of closure according to Okunna (1995) include “the closure of the Concord Newspaper group by the state security services (SSS) in 1994; the raiding and sealing off of the Punch premises by the police on the same date; the closure of the premises and all five titles of The Guardian Newspaper by armed police on 15th August 1994 also”

(f) Seizure of already printed materials

The News and Tempo magazines were subjected to intense government harassment within a short period of six months. During this period, journalist in the two sister newsmagazines suffered a series of arrests and detention, while more than 170,000 copies of the publications were seized by government security agents within the same period. Okunna (1995).

Implications on the individual and the society

Information makes the citizenry to be well informed. This enables them to make decisions that will guide their day-to-day activities. In discussing the implications of censorship on the individual and the society, it must not be seen from an all-negative angle. Several positive and beneficial things can be derived through the censorship of the mass media.

1. Lack of interest on local news: Self and government censorship can cause the audience of the mass media to lose interest in local news. When the news content is perceived as doctored, the audience is bound to lose interest in such local news.

2. Patronage of foreign media: Patronage of foreign media houses is commonplace when the local media houses fail to deliver. This will lead to the consumers subscribing to foreign media. A large amount of foreign exchange is lost as subscription fee for the foreign media. This is bad for development.

3. Loss of objective reporting and journalism: Censorship affects news contents. For fear of being censored, journalists may reduce their sense of objectivity in reporting. Many journalists have been detained or even killed for attempting to report information that will expose the government. Example of such case is that of the Chief Executive Officer of Newswatch magazine, Dele Giwa, who was killed with a letter bomb in 1986. This usually results in fear and intimidation. The psychology of journalists, in terms of their ethical standards, may be badly affected. Since most materials are censored, the journalist may become unethical and report what suits the people concerned, provided they get their cut (brown envelop) at the end or not blacklisted by the powers that be. In proffering solution to the issue of objectivity by journalist, Dunu, (2003) maintains that “the cardinal oath of journalism is objectivity and fairness. The media to ensure such unbiased, dispassionate coverage and reportage should eschew corrupt practices of all forms.... Journalists and media proprietors must ensure that they remain
resolutely incorruptible."

4. Check on press freedom: Positively censorship helps to check on the freedom of the press. One of the basic functions of the media is the freedom to disseminate information, which invariably has the tendency of influencing the opinion of the audience toward actions. To this end, the government acts as a check towards this freedom; so that the journalist carries out their job with some level of responsibility in order not to abuse this privilege Nwosu, (1998).

5. Economic loss: Censorship affects the media house in terms of loss of funds (finance) through the seizure of their publications. This may lead to the retrenchment of some of their staff and operational downsizing. The investors and stakeholders in the media organisation will be affected negatively. Expected dividends may not be forthcoming.

6. Erosion of local value system: Culturally, censorship could have adverse implication on the nation’s value system. When media contents are censored, people may start looking outwards for the information they need. This exposure to foreign media affects the value system as well as the psychology of the people. People tend to imitate the culture of the people they are exposed to, very often in terms of dressing, greeting, morals etc. This is what Okunna (1999) referred to cultural domination. In explaining this concept she said, “that because mass communication is such a powerful vehicle for the dissemination of culture, there have always been fears that massive flow of foreign mass media contents into societies other than those in which such contents are produced will negatively influence local cultures.”

7. Infringement on the fundamental right: Censorship most times infringes on the fundamental right to information of the citizens. Also the right of freedom of the journalist in carrying out his objective responsibility may also be affected. Again the right of the opposing group to own a press may be tampered with. The government may refuse media licence to the opposition. This could explain why in authoritarianism, licences are given only to the friends of the government who would not criticise the government. Stressing on this point, Okunna, (1999) maintains that “the government issues licences or patents or permits to individuals to own the press privately. Anybody who did not possess a licence was not allowed to publish. Through this method of control, only the wealthy friends of the government, whom it was obvious would not criticize the government, were given licences, thus effectively bringing the private media under the control of the government”.

8. Corruption in governance: Certain government information are said to be classified (secret) information. This kind of government censorship prevents the ordinary citizen from obtaining or probing into such classified information of the government. This is one reason for the sustenance of corruption in Nigeria. Freedom of information bill has remained on the drawing board for years now. Corruption is sustained in secrecy, but transparency, accountability and the freedom or right to know are the conditions for integrity in governance. But stress this, Ukozor in Nwosu (2003) maintains that “the official secret Act of 1962 have made journalists in
Nigeria suspicious and sceptical of government intentions. The Act has made it unlawful for journalists to publish any information about government and its functionaries without express approval. The press as a result of this law is very much impaired, that even if the journalist succeeds in getting the facts of the information kept secret by the government, he will not publish it, as it is against the law to do so.” This leads to corruption since the government knows that they cannot be questioned because the citizens are not aware of some of their practices. They take caution to the winds and behave in ways that are unassuming, because nobody can know and question their actions.

9. Fostering national unity: Censorship can foster national unity. This can be achieved through the constant check on sensational news items in the media. According to Nwosu (1998); he maintains that “the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria as an entity involves various peoples, nationalities, religion and social groupings. These diverse groups have different cultural settings and slants. This has resulted in a situation where the very existence of man is threatened through genocide, fratricide, civil strife, hatred and rancour. Also the religious practices by unrepentant and often-ignorant fanatics, who are always at each other’s neck and the media man who slants towards particular schools of thoughts, are often hostile to the disadvantaged. Because of this, government has decided that its periodic check on the press and what it brands sensitive matters would help protect the sovereignty and enhance the unity of the various peoples.”

10. Promotion of Justice: Reporting of court proceedings and cases in court are usually under government censorship. This is aimed at preventing sensationalization, prejudicing or pre-empting of cases in the court therefore leading to miscarriage of justice.

11. Consumer protection: While producers of goods and services will wish to aggressively advertise their products, the government is obligated to protect its citizens from obnoxious products. Advertisement of such products such as tobacco and alcohol, that are established avoidable causes of death and ill health are regulated or prohibited. This is good for the individual Nigerian and the nation. Drug advertisements are also under government censorship. Otherwise, the society will be inundated with information on fake products and remedies, whose label claim may be unsubstantiated. The press cannot be free to advertise poisons to the public. Butressing this, Abayomi in Nwosu (2003) stresses that the food and drug Decree 35 of 1974 “forbid advertising of any food, drug, cosmetic or other devise as treatment, preventive or cure for any of the diseases, disorders or abnormal physical states specified in Schedule I. Similarly, it forbids advertising of any food, drug, cosmetic or device in a manner that is false or misleading or likely to create a wrong impression as to its value, quality, character, value composition, merit or safety.”

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that even though censorship is
essential for the journalist to perform her legitimate duty with some level of responsibility, caution should be exercised. Checks are also required in the free flow of foreign media content into Nigeria. Care should be taken in order to prevent a situation where vital information that may benefit the citizenry is relegated to the background. Information, when properly given, enables the citizenry to make right choices in life. It is therefore important that sufficient access to varied information is granted to the individual Nigerian.

REFERENCES