

# PROBLEMS OF GOVERNMENT OWNED NEWSPAPERS: ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE DAILY TIMES AND THE OBSERVER

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## **Abstract**

The study examined the problems of government-owned newspapers. The main objective of the study was to determine the problems of government-owned newspapers, through an appraisal of the establishment, functions, management, constraints and prospects of the Daily Times and The Observer. A survey of both staff and readers of the two newspapers was conducted. The simple percentages were used to analyze the data collected. One major finding was that government-owned newspapers performed below expectation. It was discovered that interference by government officials in the editorial content among other reasons was responsible for their low credibility and thus, their low patronage. Another finding was that publicly owned newspapers should be fully privatized for better performance. It was therefore, recommended that continued existence or more establishment of government-owned newspapers was no longer justifiable. That the various governments should divest themselves of ownership of newspapers. If otherwise, they should resist the temptation to interfere in the editorial content of the existing ones.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The history of the Nigerian Press is important to determine its evolution, growth, contributions, constraints and prospects. The historical development of the press is classified into various eras. They are the experimental era, 1859-1920; the nationalist era, 1920-1937; the indigenous era, 1937-1960; government press ownership era, 1960-1983 and the dawn of modern newspapers, 1983 till date.

## **HISTORY OF THE DAILY TIMES**

The Daily Times, launched on June 1, 1926 (within the era of

1920-1937) was through the combined initiatives of both Europeans and Nigerians. Before 1925, the Nigerian Printing and Publishing Company Limited (NPPC) government press, published cabled messages from Reuters Agency for its departments and private subscribers, among whom were mainly the European commercial community. In 1925, the readers rebelled against the government's proposed increase in subscription that was prompted by rising production cost, as a way out of the deadlock that ensued the establishment of a daily newspaper to be known as Nigerian Daily Times became inevitable.

According to Omu (1978: 63):  
*All this time, sporadic opinions in favour of establishing a daily newspaper were being crystallised in regular discussions between Ernest Ikoli whose African Messenger had begun to collapse, Adeyemo Alakija, a lawyer and politician and Richard Barrow, Agent of Jurgens's Colonial Products Limited and chairman of the Lagos chamber of commerce. These saw the solution to the Reuter's new crisis in the establishment of a daily newspaper which should embody Reuter's and wireless news. The idea gained the government's approval and the support of a large number of powerful expatriate commercial interests.*

Ernest Ikoli, whose African Messenger was acquired by NNPC in 1925 played a significant role in the founding of the Daily Times. He was the first editor of the newspaper, which was located at No. 172 Broad Street, Lagos.

Quoting one of its founders, Omu (1978:62) say:

*The title of the newspaper was adopted because it was considered that the journal should serve the same function as the Times of London (like our great London contemporary ... our policy is to support government as far as possible but its conservative intervention in politics had little public*

*impact, partly because it was inconsistent in its studious endeavour to safeguard its image of independence.*

The newspaper was not as politically radical as expected. It exhibited a lukewarm attitude on issues of national interest. The newspaper was, therefore, disliked by many and lost the respect of the public.

The Daily Times witnessed three major changes or takeovers in its history. It experienced the first takeover in 1935 when it suffered a decline in circulation and advertisement revenue due to the world wide economic depression in the 1930s. It was acquired by the chairman of West African Newspapers Limited, R.B. Paul who was based in Liverpool. He owned the newspaper till 1947, when it was also taken over by the chairman of the London Daily Mirror Group, Cecil Harmsworth King who turned the newspaper around, the great feats of Cecil King in journalism, press technology and entrepreneurship shot the Daily Times into prosperity and fame, he established the Times Training Institute which became a leader in in-service training of newspaper workers in Nigeria. With an enviable standard, its circulation figure rose unprecedentedly.

According to Duyile (1987: 240):  
*The Daily Times was in indisputable lead in technical production and news gathering facilities and a parade of journalists. In 1951, its circulation increased to 25,000 copies daily, in 1955, 55,000 and in 1965, circulated 120,000 copies daily.*

The newspaper dominated the Nigerian press in the 1950s, through an attractive newspaper package, large capital investment, organizational ability to reach a large market, diversification of enterprises and use of modern press technology, the newspaper became profit-oriented through its diversification into other publications such as Sunday Times in 1957, Sporting Record in 1958, Spear Magazine, Lagos Weekend, Evening Times, Headlines, Home Studies and Business Times.

Though the newspaper produced 21 editors, the most outstanding were Babatunde Jose, Peter Enahoro, Tai Solarin and Abiodun Aloba, whose pen name was Ebenezer Williams. Jose's editorship of the newspaper (1957-1962) was very productive and eventful. On November 30, 1962 Jose became the first Nigerian managing director and chairman of the Daily Times Group. He held the position till the late 1970s.

In the words of Duyile (1987:243):

*It should be stated that Jose's regime in the Daily Times made a lot of changes and great leaps. The newspaper grew bigger in size and more qualitative in manpower resources and also became more sophisticated in production techniques. Needless to say that it became the richest newspaper organization in the country during the period.*

In 1975, the Daily Times witnessed another take-over when the federal government acquired 60 percent controlling shares in the company, which has always been privately owned. The newspaper was managed in such a way that in 1980, it circulated between 350,000 and 400,000 copies daily. However, the newspaper could no longer be editorially independent as it was turned into an instrument of propaganda for the government. The success story of the Daily Times turned sour in the 1990s as it steadily dwindled in performance, credibility and patronage that today it became a shadow of itself. It is incredible that the daily circulation figure of the newspaper was 8,000 in 2001 (Ogbiti 2002:11)

#### **HISTORY OF THE OBSERVER**

The Nigerian Observer as it was then known came into being in the government press ownership era of 1960-1983. It was established on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1968 by the then governor of defunct Midwestern State, Lt. Col. Samuel Ogbemudia. Edict No. 20 of 1967, formally established the defunct Midwest Printing and Publishing corporation, that published the then Nigerian Observer. Its functions are to disseminate information, provide enlightenment on any matter of public interest and publish well informed criticisms/features. The corporation publishes The Observer, Sunday Observer that came on stream on October 9, 1968; Sporting Observer in 1974 and Weekend Observer, it became a limited liability company in 1986 and is 100 percent owned by the Edo State government.

The newspaper started on a

sound footing with adequate funds, functional equipment and more importantly, was granted autonomy to operate. It is obvious that the state government was desirous of first class ticket. The newspaper soon paraded seasoned writers such as Ebenezer Williams, Andy Akporugo, Tom Borha and Mike Ogbeide. Within a short period, The Observer carved a niche for itself with an acclaimed professional excellence that it became the darling of all. It attracted large readership and thus, unprecedented sales. The newspaper once circulated as many as 60,000 copies across the country by aircraft in the 1970s. The impact of the newspaper was probably more overwhelming in its coverage of Nigerian civil war. In those memorable and glorious days of the newspapers, General Yakubu Gowon made The Observer a reference point and companion.

One of the newspaper's outstanding contributions was in the advancement of journalism. The impact was so overwhelming that other states rose to the challenge of establishing their own newspapers. On its enviable image, The Observer's pioneer general manager, Aloba (1998:6) said that the newspaper was well funded and was free from government control.

The Observer fulfilled the aims for which it was established and maintained an impressive record till the mid 80s, when it began to witness a steady decline in its credibility, sales and patronage. The frequent changes of executives and editors, growing government

interference, inadequate funds and obsolete equipment contributed to its dwindling performance.

The newspaper had 20 executives, on an average of one for less than two years, which Aloba (1998:6) lamented "did not make for continuity and stability".

He further noted:

*While other newspapers used modern sophisticated printing machines for quality jobs, The Observer battled with obsolete and less functional machines that rendered the newspaper unreadable and a disgrace ..... only a pittance now came from the government to run the company. There was also shortage of manpower.*

Before the Observer started deteriorating in the mid-80s, it had a major re organization in 1984, an exercise that was meant to place it at par with others. In 1987, the circulation figure of the newspaper dropped to 25,000 and in December 1987, the newspaper was closed down for one month, for a re-launch of the New Observer. On January 1, 1988 the newspaper returned to the new stand with the name, The Observer. Efforts aimed at reviving the newspaper could not be sustained for long, as it witnessed many more bleak years in the 1990s. The self-sustenance policy imposed on The Observer in January 1997 (without take off grants), took the greatest toll on the newspaper.

Respite, however, came to The Observer, when the Igbinedion administration on assumption of office on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1999 revitalized the newspaper. The newspaper is yet to