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Examining the Performances of Media Gate-Keepers
since 1999 in South West Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria

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Abstract

The watchdog role of the media has become one of the most discussed issues in political and media terrains in Nigeria. Nigeria's historic march to democratic rule is not complete without the crucial roles of media gate-keepers. This study is designed to examine the performances of media gate-keepers since 1999 in South West Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria. Focus group discussion (FGD) was adopted to examine the opinions, thoughts, attitudes, and knowledge of the respondents about the performances of the media since 1999 in Nigeria. The findings showed that professional integrity is a scarce commodity in journalistic profession in Nigeria as a result of epileptic payment of salary, sexual harassment and other forms of gratifications. Ownership factors have weakened excellent performances in Nigeria's media landscape. News reportage is skewed in favour of the owners, either government or private individuals. Also, media system, either private or government owned is established, either for political or economic reasons. Media gate-keepers are more interested in what benefits them than what benefits the society. Therefore, it is recommended that like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, an agency saddled with responsibility to investigate unethical or professional misdemeanour and corruption cases among Nigerian journalists must be established to sanitise the profession of bad eggs. As section of Nigerians advocate for the impartiality of Judiciary and Independent National Electoral Commission, people should also start to advocate for the neutrality of media institution in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Watchdogs, Media, Gate-keepers, Performances, Fourth Republic.*

Introduction

The watchdog responsibility of the media has been one of the most widely discussed conventional functions of the media (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2024). Nigeria's historic march to democratic rule in 1999 is not complete without the crucial roles of the media gate-keepers and the foremost Nigerian activists and academics. A new democratic experiment started in 1999 through a relentless pursuit of Nigerian media to institutionalise democracy. Media play important roles in the life of a democracy (Bondarenko et al., 2021). Media are the scrutinisers and examiners of government performances in any democratic milieu. The roles of the media gate-keepers have been a subject of controversy with regard to public policy, transparent and accountable leadership (Ghaznavi et al., 2024). Unethical issues among Nigerian journalists have transported the menace of media corrupt practices to the public space for scrutiny. Absence of professionalism and lack of well-established journalistic ethics

have made the issue worse (Li, 2013). More than any other institutions, either in the developing or developed economies, media have the capability to enthrone and dethrone leaders through popular consent. Free media or free press system is fundamental to exposing corrupt transactions. However, Media cannot operate in the absence of economic interventions of government, either by way of patronage, political advertisements, public policy advocacy and publicisation of political manifestoes.

Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution specifies the roles of the Nigerian mass media as follows:

The press, radio television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government.

Although, the media and other agencies of mass media are free to practise in principle, undue interference, appointment of government loyalists and foot-soldiers to manage critical positions in the media industry have erased media freedom in Nigeria. As time went on, private and government owned media were established for political and commercial purposes (Abubakar and Fadeyi, 2017). After Ibrahim Babangida had pronounced the media industry open for private investment in 1992, political actors and private individuals bombarded the media industry for the establishment of media organisations, leading to all sorts of unethical practices by Nigerian media gatekeepers. Ownership of the media by government and the politicians had compelled the media gate-keepers to contend with issues that affect professionalism and journalistic ethics (Abubakar and Fadeyi, 2017). Nigerian media have been in the front leading the struggles for the institutionalisation of democracy Abubakar and Fadeyi (2017), but issues such as ownership factors of the media, nepotism, unwholesome influence of rich advertisers and favouritism have weakened the power of the media in contemporary times (Abubakar and Fadeyi, 2017). Specifically, pre-independence media practice dislodged colonialism, its adherents and established civil rule in Nigeria. While private media organisations are known to discuss more of official corrupt practices, the government-owned media have been questionably muted about the issues of internal and external corrupt practices in Nigeria (Ofori and Sena, 2023). The responsibilities of the mass media in a democratic environment are woven around balanced news reportage between supporting and opposing forces of government of the day (Sujoko et al., 2023). However, the dynamic nature of political environment leads to biased news reportage in Nigeria. The bias has resulted in a change in the way news is produced and

consumed. Thus, the phenomenon may become a threat to ethics of journalism as a line between news and opinions gets blurred (Sujoko et al., 2023). Most government-owned media organisations are under heavy political control and ownership influence, affecting the roles of the media as the watchdogs of the society (Osmancevic et al., 2023). The presentation and representation of corruption cases in the mass media are varied. Mild representation and presentation are given to corruption cases involving current political office holders and staunch supporters of the ruling political party (Osmancevic et al., 2023).

Ghaznavi et al., (2024) investigated the pivotal role of mass media in shaping economic policies and perceptions and found that owners of private newspaper organisations and private electronic media organisations are business men and politicians who use their media organisations to expand their businesses and political ideologies. Amagnya (2024) studied the relationship between media and corruption in Ghana and found that media are used for propaganda, biased reports and that media owners and journalists engage in corrupt practices. Maniou and Ketteni (2022) studied the impact of the economic crisis on media corruption and found that corrupt practices in the media have been under-researched.

An assessment of moral and ethical performances of media gate-keepers has brought the issue of media corruption to public discourse (Francis and Fadeyi, et al., 2017). Corrupt practices in the media are alarming. Media system is now the accessory to the corrupt political office holders in Nigeria. Francis and Justine (2023) conducted an investigation on corruption and development and found that one of the key problems that deserves a holistic attention in media system is corruption. Corrupt practices in the media system are taking Nigeria back to the dark days.

Abubakar and Fadeyi (2017) aver that media system is grossly under-regulated and accounts for why government and the owner-politicians use the media for hate campaigns, to haunt, defame and discredit the perceived political opponents. The main responsibility of the National Broadcasting Commission is to uphold fairness and equity in broadcasting among radio and television stations in Nigeria. NBC has not been just in allotting sanctions to erring broadcast stations. A broadcast station perceived to be antagonistic to the ruling government is unjustifiably sanctioned for political campaign broadcasts. Besides, operating licenses are selectively given to money-bags and the cronies, puppets and friends of those in government. Government has been known to employ various tactics to influence and control the media. Media organisations bank on advertising revenue and corporate interests exert much pressure on media contents to

be in sync with their agendas (Umesh and Arjun, 2024). Weak regulatory procedures have not also helped in holding media gate-keepers accountable in their daily routines (Umesh and Arjun, 2024).

Kamalu and Anasiudu (2024) investigated conflict and warfare metaphors in the Nigerian media's conceptualisation of corruption and found that media are also accomplices in the trajectory of corrupt practices in Nigeria. There are serious concerns from various sectors as regards the performances of the media since 1999. Kamalu and Anasiudu (2024) maintained that media system has jettisoned its core values to embrace corrupt practices and selective reportage of issues. There are also concerns about the complicity of the media operators and owners in the festering corrupt practices in the political circles in Nigeria. As a result, there is a need to scrutinise the performances of the media since 1999 in Nigeria. Journalists are the society's watchdogs on the occupants of political office holders, but media gate-keepers operate in the midst of a credibility crisis (Renedo-Farpon et al., 2023).

In spite of the power of the media to influence public opinions and set agendas for the public, little is known about the roles they play in combating corruption in Nigeria (Manoli and Janecic, 2021). Thus, the objectives of this research paper were to examine the ethical performances of media gate-keepers in select radio, newspaper and television stations since 1999 in Nigeria; to examine the ownership factors on performances of media gate-keepers since 1999 in Nigeria; to investigate the balance of news reportage among select media organisations since 1999 in Nigeria; to assess the influence of advertisers and advertisements on media performances since 1999; and to examine the influence of media performances on good governance and accountable leadership since 1999 in Nigeria.

Social responsibility theory is used to explain this study. In the thinking of Adeoluwa and Adedayo (2023), social responsibility theory assumes that media of communication should be socially responsible to the masses by carrying out major functions of information, education and entertainment. Adeoluwa and Adedayo (2023) further narrated that mass media should be independent and free from the grip of the government to be able to freely scrutinise other social institutions and provide accurate and objective news reports.

The main postulation of this theory is that mass media are bound by the principles of fairness, equity, accuracy and objectivity to ensure the stability of the polity and sustenance of democratic ideals (Adeoluwa and Adedayo, 2023). The media are expected to play balanced and objective roles in the society by giving just, correct and unbiased information about

specific issues in the society and should not report news to create violence, disorderliness and chaos in the society (Riaz et al., 2023).

The assumptions of social responsibility theory are in sync with this study because the theory postulates that media and the media gate-keepers should exist to serve the information needs of the masses or society without disregard for objectivity, fairness, balance and accuracy in news reportage, thus making the theory relevant to this study.

Materials and Methods

Focus group discussion (FGD) was adopted to examine the opinions, thoughts, attitudes, and knowledge of the respondents about the performances of the media since 1999 in Nigeria. As Wimmer and Dominick (2014) note, FGD is a research strategy applied for understanding people's attitudes, opinions, thoughts and behaviour. South-West Geo-Political Zone consists of six different states, namely: Oyo, Ekiti, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and Osun states. As a result, a multi-stage sampling technique was used to choose the samples for the study. A multi-stage sampling technique, as Onabajo (2015) avers, enables the researchers to take successive samples from levels or clusters until it is possible to take a random sample of individuals.

A purposive sampling was used to select newspaper organisation, radio and television stations, in each of the six states. Ndiyo (2010) avers that purposive sample is more useful than a probability sample in small-scale surveys. In Nigeria, there are two kinds of Media ownership: government-media ownership and private-media ownership. Thus, 12 electronic media and one newspaper organisation were purposively selected for analyses in six states of the South-West. The media organisations were selected because they represent the major media located in the state capitals of the six states of the South-West. One government owned radio or television station and one private-owned radio or television station was selected in each of the six states. The media organisations were selected to have access to the thoughts, knowledge, opinions and views of practising journalists in the media stations chosen about the performances of the media since 1999 in Nigeria. Consequently, Fresh 105.9 FM and NTA Channel 3 were chosen in Ibadan, Oyo State; Voice 89.9 FM and NTA Channel 5 were selected in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State; Paramount FM 94.5 and Ogun Television (OGTV) were selected in Abeokuta, Ogun State; Radio Lagos 107.5 FM and NTA Channel 10 were selected in Lagos State; Orange 94.5 FM and NTA network were selected in Akure, Ondo State; NTA Channel

4 and Osun Radio Corporation (104.5 FM) were selected in Osogbo, Osun State; and Tribune Newspaper in Ibadan. Tribune Newspaper was selected because it has the widest coverage in the South-West Geo-Political Zone, and it is the newspaper of the region.

Using simple random sampling, the researcher further selected media organisations assumed to have a larger number of journalists and media workers. The convenient sampling method was used to select the participants for the study. Convenient sampling was chosen because data could be collected speedily and readily when the respondents are available and is also selected on the basis of geographical proximity and availability of the respondents to the researchers. As Onabajo (2015) maintains, convenient sampling involves selecting individuals that are convenient, individuals in convenient spots such as motor parks, bus stops, schools, and interview whoever is willing to answer or whoever accidentally comes along. Access to all respondents in each of the selected media organisations was practically impossible, and therefore, respondents were selected on the basis of their close locations, and the knowledge of the subject matter under investigation. We adopted focus group discussion because it allows researchers to have an accurate access to thoughts, thinking, opinions, views and knowledge about performances of the media since 1999 in Nigeria.

The discussions had seven groups of interviewees, with six participants in each of the sessions, making all the members in the seven FGDs forty-two (42 members) in all. Moreover, the study had a consideration for gender balancing. Each of the seven groups of interviewees involved 3 men and 3 women, making all the interviewees in all the groups 42. 21 males and 21 females participated in the FGD sessions.

The session maintained high confidentiality because the identities of the participants were never made known based on the ethical considerations. Data were analysed, interpreted and presented using explanation building and equally analysed thematically in line with research objectives. Inferences were made about the respondents' knowledge, views, thoughts and opinions about the performances of the media since 1999 in Nigeria. Inferences were made on the basis of the submission of the respondents. Other researchers checked the submissions of the respondents for accuracy and errors of facts.

Results

Theme 1. Journalistic Ethical Performances of Gate-Keepers since 1999

The data gathered from the FGD showed the ethical performances of the media gate-keepers since 1999 in Nigeria. The discussion revealed that only a handful of media gate-keepers abide by the codes of ethics of journalistic profession in Nigeria. The interviewees are the media men and women, working in different radio and television stations across South West States of Nigeria. Providing more information, a participant who works as a reporter with NTA Channel 3, Ibadan, Oyo State, said:

It is very hard for most journalists in Nigeria to observe the ethics of the profession, given the economic challenges that we encounter daily in the course of our official assignments. Apart from regulatory issues by the government, the issues of gratifications are rife among us. Some of us are owed several months of unpaid salaries. Many of us are not tenured staff; we are employed as part-time staff. Those who collect salary regularly among us usually complain the pay is not enough to take care of their family members. Now, if, during official assignments, our sources give us honorarium or transport fare. How do we reject such gratifications when journalists are not well remunerated either by the government or private media owners?

Another participant who works for Fresh 105.9 FM in Ibadan, Oyo State, said:

Professional integrity among us is long dead. Practising journalists work because of what the job can offer to us, not to make our society better. First of all, journalists are the products of the environment where they work. In a polluted environment, no one can lay claim to cleanliness. So, when our news sources, government officials, politicians or rich individuals offer 'kola' to us during official assignments, you will be tempted to collect it, and that affect fairness in news reportage. Even when you decline to collect it, you may be reported to your news editor, and do you know what that means?

A participant who is a reporter with Orange 94.5 FM in Akure, Ondo State, said:

Sexual harassment is much rife in the journalistic profession. Many female reporters, apart from internal sexual harassment from top staff, face untold sexual harassment from their news sources outside the station. Many government officials in the Ministries, Agencies and Departments of government see female reporters as sex objects, not minding your marital status.

Professional integrity is a serious scarce commodity in journalistic profession in Nigeria as a result of irregular payment of salary, sexual harassment and other forms of gratifications.

Theme 2. Ownership Influences on Performances of Gate-Keepers

Data gathered from the FGD showed ownership influences on performances of media gatekeepers. The discussions showed that both government and private media owners in Nigeria have abandoned codes of National Broadcasting Commission. The principles of fairness and in broadcasting have been jettisoned. Besides, ethical standards in public and private broadcast stations have been thrown to the dust bins. Shedding more light on this, a reporter with NTA Channel 10 in Ikeja, Lagos State said:

Balanced, factual, fair and accurate reporting of news has no place in most of media station these days. Money-bags call the shots in most media firms. When you look at the editors in our stations, you will discover that they are politically biased. Even if you strive to be fair in the coverage of news, your editor has a say in what goes out to our audience. Apart from that, he or she might have a friend of the news concern.

Another participant who is a reporter with NTA network, Akure, Ondo State, said:

Most private owners of the media are friends of the political office holders or even contactors of the ruling government. When issues involve the friends of private media owners in government, editors “gate-keep” those issues, especially corruption issues. Even government owned media like NTA has not been fair in reporting news and information to people. If you study NTA news reportage, you will discover that about 95% percent of news analyses and reportage are about the Federal Government. The welfare, concerns, views and opinions of ordinary citizens do not matter to the government-owned media.

Another participant who is a reporter with Paramount FM 94.5, Abeokuta, Ogun State, said:

Government-owned media are an adulterous woman that keeps getting married to a new husband every four years. Most government owned media organisations undeservedly sing praises of the ruling party and government in power. In the minutes, another ruling party and another government is formed, they switch their loyalty to a new ruling party immediately. They start to unfairly criticise officials of the former government because of political patronage and what they stand to gain from the government of the day.

Ownership factors have weakened excellent performances in Nigeria's media landscape. News reportage is skewed in favour of the owners, either government or private individuals.

Theme 3. Balance of News Reportage by Gate-Keepers for Nigerians

The data gathered from the FGD showed the balance of news reportage by media gate-keepers since 1999 in Nigeria. The discussion showed that only a handful of media gate-keepers in privately owned broadcast media organisations abide by the objectivity of news reporting profession in Nigeria. Those involved are the media men and women working in various private radio and television stations across South West States in Nigeria. Shedding more light on the issue, a participant who is a journalist with Voice 89.9 FM in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, said:

Balance of news reportage in most private or government owned broadcast media organisations is a serious issue. While the privately owned broadcast media organisations like Voice 89.9 FM takes the issue of balance and objectivity of the news reportage seriously, the same cannot be said of the government owned broadcast media organisations. What still keeps us in the business of broadcasting is the level of balance and objectivity of news analyses, presentations and fair broadcasts.

Another interviewee who happens to be a journalist with the NTA Channel 5, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, said:

Balance of news reportage is a relative term in media practice. What stands for balance of news reporting in a media station may not be the same in another. As a Federal Government owned television station, NTA tries so much to broadcast accurate and balanced news to its audience. However, government activities, programmes and events come first because of the government ownership of the broadcast station.

Another participant who works as a journalist with Radio Lagos 107.5 FM, Agidingbi Ikeja, Lagos State, said:

Government owned broadcast media organisations consider economic and political interests before balance of news reportage. Although, it may sound unethical, difficult operating environment has forced these principles down the throat of all of us in the business of broadcasting, especially those who are the employees of the government. First, the subvention given to government owned media is not enough to keep our broadcast operations alive. You have to be on the prowl for funds everywhere. And you know government is the biggest patrons of the broadcast media.

News reportage is neither balanced nor objective in Nigerian media landscape, considering the influence of media sponsors.

Theme 4. Influence of Advertisers on Performances of Gate-Keepers

The data gathered from the FGD showed the influence of advertisers on performances of media gate-keepers since 1999 in Nigeria. The discussion showed that advertisers greatly influence the operations of broadcast media organisations in Nigeria's South West geo-political zone. Providing more information, a participant who works as a reporter with the Ogun State Television (OGTV), Abeokuta, Ogun State, said:

Broadcast stations survive on money realised from advertisements. Therefore, gate-keeping decisions are taken to favour rich advertisers and other big sponsors of programmes on radio or television stations. Often, media contents are dictated by multinational corporations and wealthy organisations. Either private or government owned, editors, journalists, reporters factor rich advertisers and other big sponsors into considerations before the broadcast of programmes.

Another participant who works as a journalist with NTA Channel 49, Osogbo, Osun State, said:

There are two forms of advertisements, and we use these two forms of advertisements to realise money for our stations. We have tangible and intangible advertisements. Tangible advertisements represent the amount of money a broadcast media organisation is able to rake in to keep the station alive at a certain period of time. Intangible advertisements represent the amount of attention we are able to arrest for our numerous advertisers for their advertising messages to get responses from the target prospects. In essence, we deploy these tools to sustain the life of our broadcast business.

Another participant who works as a reporter with the Osun State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC Radio 104.5 FM), Osogbo, Osun State, said:

Advertisers are not only private business owners or multinationals, government officials and political office holders also advertise their political manifestoes or are featured on radio or television interview programmes. These sources are where good amount of money comes from to sustain the broadcast business. Therefore, we are diplomatic about the influence of these advertisers on our operations, while we also ensure the sources of the funds do not get dry.

Advertisers have weakened the social responsibility functions of the media system in Nigeria. Commercial messages are preferred in the media to socially important messages.

Theme 5. Influence of Media Performances on good governance and accountable leadership

The data gathered from the FGD showed influence of media performances on good governance and accountable leadership since 1999 in Nigeria. The discussion showed that only a handful of media gate-keepers advocate good governance and accountable leadership. Those involved are the media men and women working in different radio and television stations across South West States of Nigeria and the Tribune Newspaper organisation. Providing more information, a participant who works as a reporter with the Tribune Newspaper organisation in Ibadan, Oyo State, said:

Media organisations, either broadcast or print, are established for political or economic reasons. Although, media have been keeping government of the day on its toes, making sure that government is accountable to the people, serving as a mouthpiece for the concerns of the voiceless, ensuring there is transparency in the affairs of the government. However, times have changed. Pre-independence media system sent Military Junta packing without the bloodshed or war. The media system currently being operated in Nigeria is directly the opposite of the pre-independence media system. Media system has become lapdogs in the hands of the politicians and their government owners. Media system has become less vociferous and lull to issues that concern masses.

Another participant who works in the Tribune Newspaper organisation in Ibadan, Oyo State said:

Although media serve as the watchdogs of the society, they are not watching the running of government any more. What media watch in government is what benefits the media top echelon. Top media staff watch out for government appointments into rich portfolios and also watch out for contract from the government. Media are no longer serving public interest, but serve the interest of the few political and economic elite.

Other interviewees who work in the Editorial Unit of the Tribune Newspaper organisation in Ibadan, Oyo State said:

Good governance prevails when media system ensures the rule of law prevails in the society, and enlighten the citizenry of their rights as Nigerians. However, appointment of top media men and women by government to manage critical positions in the media system has made this social responsibility of the media a mirage. The media system has failed social responsibility tests on so many fronts in Nigeria. Media are no longer for the society, but for the rulers of the society.

Media system, either private or government owned is established either for political or economic reasons. Media system is more interested in what benefits them than what benefits the society.

Discussions

Professional integrity is a very scarce commodity in journalistic profession in Nigeria as a result of irregular payment of salary, sexual harassment and other forms of gratifications. The findings are in line with the position of Adeyemi (2013) who found that Nigerian journalists are very corrupt because they accept bribes and other forms of gratification in the process of their official assignments, and that most media organisations lack editorial independence. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that there are serious ethical questions in the media industry in Nigeria.

Ownership factors have weakened excellent performances in Nigeria's media landscape. News reportage is skewed in favour of the owners, either government or private individuals. Supporting the findings, Price et al., (2023) found that state interference and powerful private interest, political parallelism in coverage of news and other messages, and numerous threats to the autonomy of journalists hinder journalistic practice in contemporary times, and challenge the development of journalism in future. Our findings are also in sync with the findings of Fahadi (2019) who found that the media ownership is an influential factor that determine the content production and performance of the media system in any nation.

News reportage is neither balanced nor objective in Nigerian media landscape, considering the influence of media sponsors. Supporting the findings, Poti (2019) found that media system is no longer established to meet the social needs of a nation with regard to adequate information and education, but media system is more interested in capitalist economic profits and competitive market forces.

Advertisers have weakened the social responsibility functions of the media system in Nigeria. Commercial messages are preferred in the media to socially relevant and important messages. As Poti (2019) avers, media are used to generate profits, but disregard socially relevant information.

Media system, either private or government owned, is established either for political or economic reasons. Media gate-keepers are more interested in what benefits them than what benefits the society. Our findings align with findings of Buchmeier (2022) who found that media system finds itself in a predicament between adhering to its social responsibility functions to serve information, education and entertainment

needs of members of the public, and giving a priority attention to self-preservation by doing the dictates of powerful political interests. Our findings align with the findings of Obermaier et al., (2023) who found that most journalists in developing nations deny low political or economic influences on operations, but there are evidences that journalistic practices are driven by political and economic interests.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Media gate-keepers in Nigeria are found to be corrupt. Like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, an agency saddled with responsibility to investigate unethical or professional misdemeanour and corruption cases among Nigerian journalists must be established to sanitise the profession of bad eggs.

Government of the day issues licenses to friends and cronies. Therefore, procedures for issuing radio and television licenses to private individuals must be made to be more stringent. In addition, Non-Governmental Organisations, Human Rights Commission and academic bodies must be involved in the issuance of radio and television licenses in Nigeria.

Undue attention is emplaced on advertisers and big sponsors of media programmes. Therefore, commercial messages or advertisements must not take the place of the traditional functions of the media which are to inform, educate and entertain the masses. Media should evolve creative means to keep their operations alive instead of emplacing undue attention to rich advertisers and big sponsors of media programmes to the detriment of the social responsibility functions.

Most media reports and news analyses are skewed in favour of one section against the another. Stakeholders in the industry must initiate means to mete out heavy punishment to any broadcast organisations seen to be biased, one-sided and unfair in their news reportage or analysis.

As a group of Nigerians advocate for the independence of Judiciary and Independent National Electoral Commission, people should also start to advocate for the independence of media institution in Nigeria. Achieving media independence in Nigeria is achieving strong democratic ideals due to vital roles of the media in a democratic process.

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