

# Mass Media Consolidation: Implications for Public Opinion Formation in Nigeria.

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## Abstract

*The paper examines media consolidation in terms of its effects and implications on media policy and operations across the globe with focus on Nigeria. It was observed that there is growing concern over the socio-cultural implications of media consolidation which in consequence has opened up another chapter of the cultural imperialism and domination debate; that media consolidation is turning media industries into oligopolies. Consolidation has also been observed to enable ultra-powerful mass market media to be primarily loyal to its sponsors rather than public interest; and that since the bottom line for today's corporate media is profit, those who cannot afford to contribute to the profits, are likely to be factored out. The paper posits that media consolidation is a dangerous trend, facilitating an increase in concentration of media ownership in the hands of few powerful elites and organisations, and that the trend is not flexible enough to serve the interest of local communities even in cases of emergency. Laws limiting the extent of media consolidation in Nigeria, review of airwaves regulatory laws, preservation of indigenous cultures through establishment of community media structures to support indigenous content, and decommercialisation of public media amongst others are recommended.*

## Introduction

As media organisations seek ways to increase profits, expand their operations across borders and enter into international markets through conglomeration, media consolidation has opened up another chapter of the cultural domination debate. A variant of the media effects paradigm with a shift towards ownership, media consolidation has evoked very lively debates in recent time regarding the effects and implications of a concentrated media system on society. However, like the mass media effects and cultural domination debates, questions about the effects and

implications of mass media consolidation cannot be answered in broad generalities. Rather, scholars have learned to ask how media consolidation affects and impacts various societies, institutions and cultures at various levels under various conditions.

Both proponents and opponents of media consolidations as Anderson (2002:1) observes resonate their arguments around the trend that consolidation and globalisation of media over the past decade have been massive, and that media consolidation is served by government deregulation and subsidisation of the airwaves. Scholars also observe that media

consolidation and globalisation are viewed as predecessors of capitalism; that the bottom line of corporate media is profit, not agents of a democratic citizenry, but of a business and state elite. Other issues raised are that media industries have become media oligopolies; that critiques of globalisation and corporate power are marginalised; that media audiences are treated as consumers rather than citizens; and that the traditional notion of media having a public interest obligation has disappeared. Also, that democratically based media outlets have expanded; while marginalised provide an alternative to corporate media messages.

Another key factor associated with media consolidation is that media policy is increasingly made outside of national regulatory agencies, in global venues that too often remain unscrutinized and poorly understood. It was in reaction to this trend that McChesney (2001:9) retorted that in the era of globalisation, trade liberalisation, transnationalisation of mass media and global communication technology, the understanding hundred years ago that imperialism is a way of domination through ideology of power and war in the process that shows the dynamics of political relationships driven by power domination, mostly from more powerful colonisers to the less powerful colonised has changed. In its place, a strong imperialism fostered by media ownership styles, processes and channels in a systematic effort at globalising the world with sophisticated and most effective cultural and media imperialism has been utilised as political and economic apparatus of any powerful groups, particularly from developed countries to developing countries.

This paper makes an important critical thinking on media consolidation, its

effect and implications on society with regards to how Nigeria is faring in the globalised world. To enable us follow the arguments presented more logically, however, it is pertinent to make clarifications on the concept and its subsumed conceptual issues. Thereafter, we shall proceed with media consolidation, tracing its roots, effects and implications so as to enable us reach a conclusion and proffer some recommendations.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

The debates and arguments surrounding the effects and implications of media consolidation revolve around cultural imperialism and its influence on political power at the centre which the mass media feature prominently. This has made it compelling for us to make clarifications on the key concepts upon which the arguments are anchored – media consolidation which is the theme of this discourse, cultural imperialism and globalisation which are the key concerns raised by scholars with regard to conglomeration of the mass media.

**Media Consolidation:** Also known as concentration of media ownership, refers to the majority of media outlets being owned by a small number of conglomerates and corporations, which Bagdikian (2000:6) observes, that such corporate ownership of the media and mass advertising effects the news of a nation and influences its political and economic agendas. He views such a trend as detrimental, dangerous or otherwise, problematic since such ownership structure enables the owners to exercise an undue influence over content, thus making the citizens mere consumers and weakening their ability to participate in public debates. That is, media consolidation affects public interest.

**Cultural Imperialism:** Culture has been defined by several scholars but there is a convergence as to what it encapsulates. According to Okpaga (2003:60), culture refers to the whole range of human activities, which are created and learned and transmitted from generation to generation through various learning processes, its components being norms and values. Cultural imperialism as defined by Schiller (1976) in Ugande (2005:42) proposes that a society is brought into the modern world system when its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system. Surmounting the definitions of cultural imperialism, Ugande (2005:44) observe that all definitions of cultural imperialism boil down to one central idea which he notes is the fact that the mass media, along with other industries in Western societies, follow a deliberate policy designed by powerful economic and political interests to transform and dominate the cultures of other people. The transformation believed to be targeted at third world countries, is said to be displacing traditional value, beliefs and other important features of the way of life in those societies.

**Globalisation:** Simply referred to as the rapid integration of economies worldwide through trade, financial flows, technology spill overs, information networks and cross-cultural currents; globalisation has attracted several definitions and interpretations around the world. Shonekan (2000) in Okpaga (2003:27) views globalisation as the increasing integration of the nation economies with the rest of the world. It features as he observes are economic

integration through:

*...trade and capital flows (investment) increasing adoption of common relations between sovereign nation, creation and nurturing of institutions that support the process of integration in addition to integration in other areas such as national value, cultural beliefs as well as religious beliefs.*

This shows that globalisation, somewhat implies a worldwide spread or the universalisation of certain economic and political practices, identities and structures with significant impact on the players involved in the game with the sideliners feeling more of the negative impact.

### **Arguments surrounding Media Consolidation**

Prior to the eighties and nineties, national media systems were typified by domestically owned media industries. In Nigeria, despite the fact that media establishments (both print and broadcast) first emerged through foreigners, the country was able to regulate form within, its media industry. All of this is changing and rapidly too with convergence and consolidation becoming the order of the day. Specific media industries are becoming more concentrated through conglomeration, and the dominant players in each media industry increasingly are becoming subsidiaries of huge global media structures. McChesney (2001:2) observe that the logic guiding media firms in this trend is clear, that is “get very big quickly or get swallowed up by someone

else". He notes that the trend is taking place in many other industries as well. The battle over Nigeria's broadcast market by the predominant broadcast outfits, Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and private broadcast conglomerates such as the African Independent Television (AIT) as they increase their reach across the nation through establishment of more stations is a pointer to the McChesney's assertion. Also, the consolidation of the Nigerian banking sector which saw smaller ones being bought over or merged with bigger ones attest to his observation that it is happening in other industries as well.

Deregulation of the media was advocated and hailed across the globe as the most effective way of allowing equal access and ensuring even competition between media organisations. It was believed that the removal or relaxation of government regulation or control of the mass media especially broadcasting which was once in most countries an exclusive preserve of government would foster public interest broadcasting. Once national deregulation of the media began in major nations like the United States of America and Britain as noted by McChesney (2001:32), it was followed by global measures like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the formation of the ground for investment and sales all designed to clear the ground for investment and sales by multinational corporations in regional and global markets. This laid the foundation for the creation of the global media system, dominated by conglomerates like DAAR group in Nigeria.

Erik (1997:5) observes that now in place, media consolidation has its own logic. Firms must become larger and diversified to reduce risk and enhance profit

making opportunities and they must straddle the globe so as to never be outflanked by competitors. This also explains why the DAAR communications group has launched the DAAR Satellite Television. Deregulation of the mass media which has opened up opportunities for media consolidation has not been unopposed. While media conglomerates press for policies to facilitate their domination of markets throughout the world, strong arguments for the protection of domestic media and cultural industries persist. Opponents of media consolidation argue that some ground rules must be built to protect indigenous cultural fares from domination by foreign cultures propagated by the conglomerates.

Schiffrin (2000:61) observes that in the present era, where profit is the ultimate aim of media conglomerates, such a concentrated corporate ownership of media and mass advertising is detrimental to indigenous socio-cultural values, since the consumers of media fare rather than audiences are made helpless and forced to consume the content they do not have any control over. He argues that the implication of advertisers' influence on media through corporate ownership is more demeaning than government regulation which was used as the premise for the arguments for the deregulation of the media industry.

In his wake up call on what is happening in the media and how it influences political power and affects vital societal formations, Bagdikian (2000:22) retorts that it will leave little doubt that mass media's firmest marriage is to advertising and profits as occasion by consolidation. This he says leaves the public without a way of indentifying, analysing and assessing alternative social forces in society. Media consolidation as noted by Bagdikian

introduces developing characteristics in media, including the decline of journalistic integrity, the dumbing down of publishing industry and the diminished seriousness of the broadcasting industry. On the other hand, proponents of media consolidation argue that cultural trade barriers and regulations harm 'consumers' and inhibit the ability of nations to develop their own competitive media firms.

McChesney (2001:6) is however, particular about the effects of media consolidation and its effect on the political and economic culture of nations. He opines that in the area of democracy, the emergence of such a highly concentrated media system in the hands of huge private concerns violates in a fundamental manner, any notion of a free media system in democratic theory. In his words,

*The problems of having wealthy private owners dominate the journalism and media in a society have been well understood all along; journalism in particular, which is the oxygen necessary for self-government to be viable will be controlled by those who benefit by existing inequality and the preservation of the status quo.*

This argument may seem to contradict the fairly common view of those who assert that global conglomerates can at times have a progressive impact on culture, especially when they enter nations that had significant state censorship over the media or nations that had been tightly controlled by corrupt crony media systems. However, as noted by Croteau and Hoynes (2001:p.31) not denying the fact the media consolidation has some positive elements,

the globally consolidated media systems is radically bourgeois in that it respects, on balance, no tradition or custom if it stands in the way of profits. Also, once capitalist relations have become pre-eminent, the global corporate media systems is politically conservative, because the media agents are significant beneficiaries of the current social structure around the world and any upheaval in property or social relations, particularly to the extent that reduces the power of business is not in their interest.

They argue that sometimes, the bias is explicit and corporate overlords simply impose their neoliberal political positions on their underlings, while sometimes, the bias is subtle and is due purely to commercial concerns. This implies that media consolidation has ushered in an era where political interests and profits interest of the ownership overrides public interest and determines media content. It is against this backdrop that Schiffrin (2000:7) categorically emphasised that the free market place of ideas does not refer to the market value of each idea, but rather that "ideas of all sorts should have a chance to be put to the public, to be expressed and argued fully and not in sound bytes". He observes that with concentration comes hyper commercialisation, as media firms have more ability to extract profit from their activities, which generates an implicit political bias in media content. He notes that consumerism, class inequality and so-called individualism tend to be taken by media conglomerates as natural and even benevolent; whereas political activity, civic values and anti-market activities are marginalised. According to him, media consolidation has made the best journalism pitched to the business class and suited to its needs and prejudices with only a few

exceptions. This situation he likens to what is happening in India which is influenced by the media giants and the revamped news media focuses more on fashion designers and beauty queens than on the dark realities of a poor and violent country, a slant which is quite often subtle.

As noted by McChesney (2001:7), the genius of a consolidated commercial media system is the general lack of censorship, which is said as noted by George Orwell in his unpublished introduction to 'Animal Farm', censorship on free societies is infinitely more sophisticated and thorough than in dictatorships, because "unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for an official ban. Though most critics of media consolidation strongly argue against it based on the inherent implications, David (1999:16) balances his argument with the statement that it is equally impossible or unlikely for media conglomerates to control the thoughts and beliefs of nations in order to dominate or destroy indigenous cultures. According to him, they can only succeed in altering some aspects of the social, political, economic and cultural ideologies of nations; a factor which he believes has already been made difficult for any nation to deter as a result of globalisation.

### **Effects and Implications of Media Consolidation**

As the media conglomerates spread their tentacles across the globe, it is important to point out its effects upon the diversity of information reaching particular markets. Critics of media consolidation as evident in the arguments analysed raise the issue of whether monopolistic or oligopolistic control of a local media market can be fully accountable and dependable in serving the public interest

which is believed to be the sacred virtue of the mass media. If for example, only one or two media conglomerates dominate in a single market, the question is not only that of whether they will present a diversity of opinions, but also of whether they are willing to present information that may be damaging to either their advertisers or to themselves. With this questions unanswered, it clearly indicates that media consolidation has more demeaning implications on the cultural likes of a society than imagined.

Herman and McChesney (1997:14) observe that concentration of media ownership is very frequently seen as a problem of contemporary media and society because media consolidation has a number of undesirable consequences which includes:

- *Commercially driven media system:* media consolidation has enabled ultra-powerful mass market media to be primarily loyal to its sponsors (ownership, advertisers and government) rather to the public interest. This subjects the citizenry to the manipulation of the sponsors, thus, swaying a large number of people to adopt a particular set of social, economic, cultural and political systems that are interest of the sponsor at the expense of general public interest which may be counter to the values propagated.
- *Restriction of opinion:* for the general public, there are fewer diverse opinions and voices available in the media as cross-media operated by the conglomerates adopt a particular pattern of presentation of information. For the conglomerates, held in common ownership, the greater the opportunity to reap

economies. This leaves the audience members with less alternative opinions on issues.

- *Public airwaves restrictions:* The public airwaves, upon which broadcasting strives has been restricted to private and external influence and control with minimal regulation. Explaining this factor, Herman (1999:20) observes that the global media conglomerates are building empires where international frontiers do not exist, national policies are irrelevant and regulatory laws are minor hazards. He notes that if only a few companies representing the interest of a minority elite control the public airwaves of millions of citizens, “then calling them 'public airwaves' is only lip service”.
- *Marginalisation of public opinion:* For minorities and others, fewer opportunities are available for voicing their concerns and reaching the public. Since the bottom line for today's corporate media is profit, those who cannot afford to consume, that is, contribute to the profits, are likely to be factored out. This implies that media conglomerates use their domination of the news media in a self-serving way, hence, cementing their political leverage on citizens who are given less opportunities to express their counter views.
- *Absence of healthy competition:* Conglomeration of the media has forced out healthy, market-based competition leading to slower innovation and increased prices. Owners of conglomerate media in efforts to dominate and control the market, adopt high level technologies that put other independent media

outfits at disadvantage. As such stations struggle to also acquire the technologies, they are left with no alternatives than to increase prices which also affects their patronage.

Subsuming these consequences, citing Boyd-Barrett (1977), Ugande (2005:49) observe that the four models of media imperialism pointed out by Boyd-Barret, which includes the shape of the communication vehicle; the set of industrial arrangements; values of practice; and media consent and market penetration, with their overriding influence, has overshadowed both the media and cultures of developing nations.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Following our exploit into media consolidation and its associated effects and implications or consequences, it is pertinent, in conclusion, to observe that media consolidation is a dangerous trend, facilitating an increase in concentration of media ownership in the hands of few powerful elites and organisations, and subsequently reducing the overall quality and diversity of opinion and information communicated through major channels, which can lead to censorship of a wide range of critical thought. Media consolidation is also not flexible enough to serve local communities in case of emergency and takes the audiences gradually out of traditional media and weakens the role of professionals. The media conglomerates are only interested in advancing their corporate and commercial interests and values, and denigrate or ignore that which cannot be incorporated into their mission.

Based on these observations, it is thus recommended that:

- Democratic ideals should be protected by making laws that limit the extent of media consolidation in Nigeria so as not to factor out the already presumably disenfranchised majority in the society.
- Review of airwaves regulatory laws should be carried out by the National Broadcasting Commission, the Nigerian Telecommunications Commission, the Nigerian Press Council and other stakeholders to ensure that smaller or independent media outfits are not marginalised.
- Local and domestic media conglomerates should be encouraged to preserve indigenous cultures through support in their content materials. That is, non-governmental organisations should support the promotion and production of local media content, while Nigerian corporations should also be enlightened to support through sponsorship.
- Due to the direct implications of media consolidation on the political culture of Nigeria, community media structures should be established to educate the ruralites who are more prone to the manipulations of the conglomerates on how to cope with daily lives and participate in the discourse of issues affecting their welfare.
- Government owned media should be decriminalised and structured into proper broadcast outfits like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other media outfits owned by governments across the world to serve as oppositions to the commercially driven media conglomerates and offer the citizenry,

opportunities to air their views and express their opinions concerning national affairs.

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