

Credible News Measures: A Medium's Integrity.

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Introduction

The growing need for development in all parts of the world has continued to throw up a great number of challenges in the communications world. These challenges affect all media of communication ranging from the traditional to the modern. Traditional means of communication, in this sense, will include what Melkote (1991: 201) describes as 'products of the local culture' which serves the community as a vehicle for the exchange of information and ideas crucial to the overall development of its people. The modern, on the other hand appropriates all such media which are driven by literacy in content and execution of the means by which information and ideas are circulated within a particular community and beyond. It is a fact taken for granted that no society can develop without a properly structured communication system which, among other things guarantees access to news for the people. A lot of the decisions people make are based on information available to them, through the media; hence the serious attention which the media enjoys today in various forms of discourse having to do with social relations and development.

The process of globalization that is taking on the entire world as one unit at the moment has equally made the place of the media a very crucial one in human and societal development. When Marshal McLuhan brought up the concept of a "global village" through enhanced communication, little did he envisage the world was going to fast become less than a village as we now have it. Through the impact of communication and faster information dissemination the world today has moved on beyond what Agbese (2006:68) describes as "a borderless town". Beyond this the world today is, more or less, a global hut. The power of information and communication technology (ICT) has become so overwhelming on the human race to such an extent that most people now live their lives around contraptions thrown up by these technologies.

One area where this kind of impact is most noticeable is in the news media. Numerous scholars, within and outside the sphere of media studies, have also shown an appreciation of this fact. For instance, McQuail (2005:4) contends that:

Whatever changes are underway, there is no doubting the significance of mass media in contemporary society, in the spheres of politics, culture, everyday social life and economics. (p.4)

The role of the media stands out in the area of the mobilization of the populace for participation in all the needed spheres of influence which may contribute, in a way, to the reduction of conflict in society and by extension expand the possibilities of attaining a point of reckon in the development agenda. The platform for this mobilization through the media is usually found in the content of the media.

News as media content

The issue of content has always attracted enormous attention in both the electronic and the print media. In the electronic media, however, the hoopla is often more intense mainly because of the increasing rate of awareness among the viewing or listening public mainly of events and happenings going on around them. In addition to this, the level of literacy appears to be increasing even among people in rural communities in such a way that they are more able to interrogate information received by them. And one of the common ways by which information get to the people is through news in either the print or the electronic media. There have been several attempts at defining news. It is therefore difficult to regard any particular one as the canonical definition of the concept. In one of such numerous attempts, MacBride (1980:156-7) identifies the major qualities that must be present in news:

...it must be circulated quickly after the event,
be of wide interest, contain information which

the reader or listener has not received before,
represent a departure from the everyday pattern
of life and contain information that is useful
in reaching decisions. (pp.156-7)

From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that authenticity, significance and timeliness are tripodal to the acceptance of a programme or material as news.

We can therefore conclude that news is new information of any kind about specific and timely events. In other words, it is the reporting of current events usually by local, regional or mass media in the form of newspapers, television and radio programmes, or sites on the web. The art of news reporting, therefore, becomes a form of journalism with its own peculiar style. If the content of news is significant enough, it eventually becomes history. In today's world, a lot of attention is paid to news in the media especially because people require access to information quite more frequently than in the past. The contending forces in the lives of individuals and corporate agencies have increased tremendously such that information is being sought after from time to time in order to make informed choices. In making these choices, decisions must be based on news items which provide the public with factual and accurate information. With varying degrees of development across the globe news has moved from the idea of 'what people care about' to 'what we [journalists] tell them it is' (Silvia, 2001:3) and eventually to a major information source for people who regard it with a lot of caution. News is often expected to be a non-fictional account of happenings around us. Therefore, a medium gains considerable degree of respect based on the reliability of information it dishes out to the public. Though the demand of the audience or viewership these days is turning towards a satisfaction of emotions (laughter, fear, violence etc) or what is generally referred to as entertainment programmes, the demand for news is such that the people are almost sure to want to listen to credible stories.

The search for credibility

One of the major content-related challenges facing the media today is the issue of credibility. This is so even in spite of the seeming democratization of the media space and

the multiplicity of media organizations the world over. People who are interested in news from the media are always in search of what is accurate and reliable. Credibility therefore becomes the unique selling point (USP) for media organizations to stand out and command the needed respect from the public. It is in realization of the importance of credibility that Agbese (2006) contends that:

...the challenge of the news media even in
the face of the relentless march of globalisation
is the same challenge that has always confronted them.
this is the challenge of providing accurate
and reliable information. (p.68)

For a medium to become acceptable to its consumers credibility becomes a key factor. This is given credence by Schweiger (2000) as he points out that credibility becomes “an important heuristic for content selection” (p.38).

In addition to its influence on the journalistic success of a medium, credibility also contributes in no small measure to the commercial success of the media. In Nigeria for instance, there is stiff competition among the electronic media in the area of newscasts. This competition can only be won by those stations who regard credibility as the first rule. In other words, it should serve a station in good stead if its listeners or viewers do not have to wait for another medium to make up their minds whether or not to believe a news items, which they have received through it.

Credibility is a major news value and various scholars and researchers have used a variety of measures and statistical procedures to foster an understanding of media credibility. Bivariate and multivariate approaches have been used alongside regression analysis and factor analysis as observed by Abdulla et al (2002:8) . While many researchers have used traditional data collection methods such as telephone surveys, laboratory and field experiments, others have gone as far as employing new technologies such as online surveys and the like to measure the credibility of news stories. In all these attempts it has become clear that believability, accuracy and depth of information are major ingredients, which combine to confer credibility on news items.

The idea of creating a set of credibility standards is gradually becoming a recurring decimal in the media world. In one instance, it grew out of a panel discussion at a 1998 conference sponsored by the project for Excellence in Journalism and Pew Charitable Trusts. Though the major concern of the conference was on online news or news on the web the proceedings and the outcome reflect the fact that the postulations on the issue of credibility can be universally applied. In a similar vein, a recent news media credibility assessment study conducted by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) in New Delhi showed that though viewership of television news channels has gone up “credibility of their hastily put together news bulletins has not”¹.

Despite the diversity of scales, the various scale items in measuring news credibility developed by media researchers are highly similar and measure the same underlying dimensions. These scale items generally point at trustworthiness, fairness, accuracy and believability as key elements in the process. Rather than searching for a single scale, researchers often create ad hoc scales to tap into hypothesized dimensions of credibility.

In the field of broadcast journalism the higher a station gets on the overall credibility scale, the better for it and its owners. In the words of Adedire (2000:60) credibility is “the ultimate credential of a news bulletin”. This credential is not just desirable for a broadcast medium to remain relevant, it is equally vital for the sustenance of this relevance because:

A credible news bulletin will attract believability, authenticity and respect. Any news bulletin that is deficient of these attributes is a disgrace to the broadcasting station involved (Adedire 2000:61).

The convergence in the media world today is also one major reason for which every broadcast station must be ready to address the issue of credibility with utmost

¹ CMS Credibility Tracking Study press release available online at <http://www.cmsindia.org/cms/events/credibility.pdf>

seriousness. The combination of broadcasting, the Internet and telephony has made news verification an easier task for media consumers.

Credibility: the GTV experience

Since its establishment by the Ogun State Government in 1981 Ogun State Television (OGTV) recently rechristened Gateway Television (GTV) has been disseminating news stories to its viewers with great passion and commitment. A lot of changes have also taken place in the packaging and presentation of the stations news bulletins all aimed at achieving greater acceptability among the station's viewers. In order to reach the grassroots further the television station also offers two translated versions of its news bulletins in Yoruba and Egun languages.

Today, television news is a major source of information for the Nigerian public. This trend is a reflection of the contention of Gormly (2004:11) that "television carries more emotionalism than print" because of the existence of sights and sounds. This reliance on television news has made the job of packaging information more challenging. Gateway Television has been trying hard to fulfill the central purpose of journalism which is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need in order to take certain decisions on major issues affecting their lives. Some of the landmark achievements in this regard will include the coverage of the 1983 presidential campaigns of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), the coverage of the Progressive Governors meeting in the early 80s, the coverage of the presidential campaign of Bashorun M.K.O Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the coverage of the resultant crises following the annulment of the June 1993 Presidential elections in Nigeria.

During these epochal coverages the profile of the station rose as viewers hungered for its news and waited impatiently for 8.30pm, which was the time that the major news bulletin for the day was relayed. The continuation of military rule after the electoral annulment seemed to have a negative impact on the quality of newscasts of the station as it did to most other government owned broadcast media in the country. The incursion of private broadcast stations into the scene in 1994 also threw greater challenges. Since the return

of civil rule in 1999, there has been a major battle to remain as relevant and credible as in the periods mentioned earlier. Interestingly, most of the news materials seen on air these days border heavily on the political. The sensitive nature of most situations and the need to manage government as an institution has remained a great challenge in achieving the desirable level of credibility in the packaging and presentation of news. In the search for a safe haven, Gateway Television has found a way out. Like most stations in Nigeria today, news values now thrive on prominence of individuals (who is involved). Often times, who said what becomes more important than what was said, thereby making the maker of the news more important than the news itself.

This approach indeed marginalizes the people and the community (Omenugha, 2005). Should this trend also continue, there is great wonder how close Gateway Television is to the expectation of development communication in which case television “can be made socially relevant and responsible where and when concern and respect for the viewer is the pre-eminent criterion for its programming and content” (Soola, 2002:24). The new trend smacks of a resort to persuasive news and too much attempt to persuade dents the credibility of news. At an excessive level, persuasion may produce *astroturf* news, that is, news that looks like a grassroots material but is a fibre loaded with fabrications and manipulations.

Conclusion

The question of how to come to a consensus on credibility issues will always remain a tricky one. Transparency in the media is a key requirement. The world has also moved on. This explains the recent emergence of citizens’ journalism or glogosphere which is an internet based response to public dissatisfaction with mainstream media. With millions of such sites on the web today mainstream journalism is facing yet another potent challenge. It should be noted that a medium’s reputation is on the line each time a story is published or broadcast. Voluntary credibility standards, which imply a deliberate decision to remain committed to that which is factually credible, can help a medium to determine its popularity rating. To achieve this the news medium must be able to jettison biases and political considerations, which can have far reaching negative impact on its

work especially in the face of alternative media sources which now compete with mainstream media in the information business. In other words, a medium is ultimately responsible for its own reputation and eventual rating on the overall credibility scale.

The time has come for the media to put in place credibility reinforcing strategies towards strengthening their integrity. Credible news measures are a responsibility of both the media organizations and the individual reporters, sub-editors, editors, managers and even media owners who are all stakeholders in the industry. There is an urgent need for all of these stakeholders to “start digging tunnels” (Traber, 2006) which will provide the outlet from the ideological prison of self-censorship which has continued to do a great damage to news and by extension impinged on the integrity of our media and their employees.

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