

EMERGING TRENDS
IN GENDER,
HEALTH &
POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION
IN AFRICA



A PUBLICATION IN HONOUR OF
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– A WORLD-CLASS AUTHOR, TEACHER, MENTOR
AND LEADING COMMUNICOLOGIST

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CHAPTER 14

**Journalism, Politics
and the Blurring Line:
The Dissolve of the
Watchdog and the Master**



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and
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Introduction

On Friday, April 10, 2014, one year before the All Progressives Congress (APC) won the presidential election, one of the leaders of APC, Bola Tinubu, while addressing the Nigeria Guild of Editors in Abuja, the nation's capital, alluded to the disappearing line of demarcation between the watchdog (the media) and those in positions of power. He said:

While a section of the media has performed creditably well, a growing section is besotted with power, often crossing the line. The lines have been crossed. The newsrooms have become shopping centres where interests shop for the most pliable editor or reporter to push their points of view or story. The investigative knack is gone. The fire of patriotism continues to be extinguished and that of professionalism is now only a flicker.

Journalism has become not just a danger to itself as a profession, but inflicts harm to the Republic by knowingly feeding the people half-truths, innuendos and outright falsehood. When reporting and reality are too far apart, journalism has ceased and propaganda has begun. A nation awash in propaganda is a nation dry and devoid of democracy much like a desert is devoid of water.

By this statement, Bola Tinubu raised an alarm on the descent of Nigerian media into a political tool rather than serve as a watchdog of the polity. The overall implication of the statement is the reality that stares in the face of the Nigerian press – the gradual blurring of the line between the role of the media (and journalist) and the role of politicians. While it is absolutely true that the two need each other both for their optimum performance and for good of the polity (Udoakah, 2014), the need for roles differentiation is constant and unmistakable. The media as an economic entity need to publish the opinions and activities of politicians to attract the audience, including advertisers; the politicians need the platform offered by the media to reach the governed and their supporters generally, and to create goodwill for themselves as part of their investment towards a new election.

However, this symbiotic relationship between the media and the politicians pushes the former, subtly or by force of compulsion, into a seemingly defenceless corner where the latter use different but coordinated tactics to subdue the media and have them as their ally and less of a watchdog institution.

By watchdog role of the media is meant the duty of the media in ensuring that government and its personnel ensure good governance. As Watson and Hill (2006, p. 303) say:

“The media pride themselves on their role as watchdogs of injustice, abuse and corruption; champions of public interest. The watchdog barks on behalf of the people, in their defence against the powerful, whether these are in government, business, industry or any walk of life where the interest of the public can be affected”.

In recent times, however, a variant of the watchdog metaphor has emerged. This is the guard dog metaphor which, according to Watson and Hill (2006, p.119), “suggests that the media perform as a sentry, not for the community but for special interest groups that have the power and influence to establish and maintain their security systems”. Donohue,

Tichenor and Olien (1995) argue that the guard dog media “are conditioned to be suspicious of all political intruders, and they occasionally sound the alarm for reasons that individuals in the master households, that is, the authority structure, can neither understand nor prevent. These occasions occur primarily when authority within the structure is divided”. But in communities where there is no apparent conflict within power structures “the media are sleeping guard dogs...where different local groups have conflicting interests, the media are more likely to reflect the views of the more powerful groups”.

The above strongly highlights the conceptual differences between the watchdog and the guard dog. Ordinarily, the watchdog keeps a close look on those in power on behalf of the governed, serving as a restraining check on them. However, in circumstances that the “watchdog” is now established, owned and operated by the same persons and institutions it was meant to serve as a bulwark, it goes without saying that the watchdog is ingratiated to the extent that the line between the watchdog and the government becomes blurred. Indeed where government, institutions and individuals now own and operate the watchdog, the relationship becomes that of a master and servant (the watchdog), with the servant not only doing the bidding of the master, but is constantly at the master’s feet asking for errands to run for him.

A watchdog (press) that runs errands for the master (owner) is more or less a guard dog: they are similar in attitudes with the master and that which concerns the master concerns them. They defend the master even with the drop of their blood and barks at enemies (perceived and real) of their master, checkmate intruders and trespassers into the master’s territory and generally distance themselves from professional colleagues and professionalism.

The compromised watchdog and guard dog lapses or degenerates into what Donohue *et. al.* (1995) “lapdog”, which, as Watson and Hill (2006, p.119) put it, “is submissive to authority and oblivious to all interests except those of powerful groups, and serves to frame all issues according to the perspective of the highest powers in the system”.

In essence, when a media organisation leans towards the establishment (institutions and the politico-economic elites) more than the people, such a media organisation will be both deferent and submissive to the institution and the politico-economic elites to the extent that the task of drawing a line between them becomes herculean.

Theoretical Foundation

This discourse is founded on the Social Conformism Theory. According to Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), the theory argues that mass media as an institution draws support from powerful politico-economic and social structures in the society. This the mass media do directly or indirectly. For that support the mass media feel or are obligated to support such structures.

Akpan (2009, p. 311), in further expatiating on the theory, says that “support for the media by key political and economic actors, whether institutional, corporate or individual, is not value-free. Embedded in the support, quite often, is the demand for the media to encourage conformism with the existing economic and political structures. The support from political and economic actors is a subtlety to capture, with a view to controlling, the media proprietors and operatives, and cause them to encourage a high level of conformism with the political and economic system from which they draw support, and upon which they are greatly dependent for survival and profitability.

Lazarsfeld and Merton state that the media exhibit social conformism through their manifest content, that is, what is said but, more importantly, what has been left unsaid. The authors therefore argue that such external control makes the media to “fail to raise essential questions about the structure of society... (and) restrain the cogent development of a genuinely critical outlook” (1948, p. 107).

Akpan (2009, p. 312) argues, that “external control does not suggest the total absence of critical content”, but as Severin and Tankard (2001, p. 301) state:

“There are occasional critical articles or programmes but...they are so few that they are overwhelmed by the tide of conformist materials...Social objectives are abandoned by commercial media when those objectives interfere with profits...This economic pressure results in conformity by omitting sensitive issues”.

In one word, social conformity by the media and their operatives contributes to and is a consequence of the blurring line.

The Blurring Line

It is a fact probably without contest that the mass media serve as a link between the government and the citizens, and in that role, the mass media render on behalf of the citizens the duty of holding government

accountable and ensuring transparency in political and corporate governance. As tools to measure the performance of a government in power, the mass media position themselves as those to be trusted for a fair and objective account of the day's intelligence and to reflect back to the society, without distortion, the true image of the society.

The metaphors given to the media "assume a clear division between the mass media and the state" (Rose and Kiss, 2006, p.322). And in spite of the assumptions of clear divisions between the media and the state, the reality suggests "a metaphor of blurred boundaries" which "provides us with useful insights into contemporary developments in the news media. In terms of structure, we see a blurring of boundaries between different media; between insiders and outsiders; between media and government; and between news and entertainment" (Rose and Kiss, 2006, p.332).

The mass media are so important in the contemporary society that they have become a major institution through which political activities and governmental actors seek to accomplish political and policy goals. As Cook (1998, p. 164) puts it, "...the news media may well be an unwitting adjunct to power...Making news, in other words, is not merely a way to get elected or re-elected to boost one's ego or to be a show horse instead of a work horse; instead, it is a way to govern". The implication of the above is that given the importance of the news media, political actors have tended to govern through the media. For this to be successful, the political gladiators often seek, openly and subtly, to make the media not only to report their daily activities, but to make them (the media) a strong ally in the business of governance. And since "the mass media have ...become the leading institutions of the public sphere" (Hackett and Zhao, 1998, p.1), it becomes advantageous to the political actors to try to narrow down or possibly remove the lines between them and the media, in spite of the far-reaching implications, most of them negative, for the society as a whole.

Democracy is founded on the media to serve as a true public sphere (Tollefsen, 2009); it is premised on the ability and willingness of citizens to discuss, freely, issues that are of concern to them; it is predicated on the media being able to keep themselves untainted by the nuances or sophistry of political actors. Therefore, it is critical for the mass media not to surrender their independence – the very thing that indicates or highlights the boundaries of politics and journalism. In other words, the more the whittling away of the independence of the mass media, the more the line between the media and politics is blurred, and the less the difference between the two can be spotted.

Traditionally, the mass media are regarded as the Fourth Estate of the realm, a position which makes the media a non-institutional actor in governance. Theirs is to keep an eye on the government on behalf of the larger society. But when the watchdog intentionally integrates itself with the government or government, subtly or openly, ingrates the media, then the Fourth Estate role cannot be sustained as the two institutions have “dissolved” (blended) as in TV effects into each other, thus producing a hybrid which respects neither roles differentiation nor independence for the media.

This expresses the current media situation in Nigeria – a situation in which the government and the journalists are blended or fused, and in which the lines between the journalists and the government are blurred and are gradually disappearing. “For the most part, (the media)”, according to the former Prime Minister of Canada, Donald Savoie, “is no longer just a narrator or an independent observer reporting or commenting on political events. It has become an important political actor in its own right” (quoted by Rose and Kiss, 2006, p. 336). It is natural that this trend raises other concerns about the potential reliability of political news media.

What Blurs the Boundaries?

A point that should be stressed is that the boundaries are both consciously and unconsciously blurred – consciously by both the political gladiators and the journalists, and unconsciously by the journalists. This suggests that many journalists do not realise and can hardly accept that through their actions they have blurred the lines between them and the politicians. Yet in their daily operations, the blurring of professional boundaries is manifest. Quite a number of factors contribute to this situation.

i. The Factor of Media Ownership

The common saying that who pays the piper dictates the tune of the music is apt in this case. Most media owners are politicians directly in government or outside the government but with active support for the government with various motivations for the support. Government, on its part, is also active in media ownership. The history of media development in Nigeria since Independence indicates a trend of government involvement in the direct ownership, operation and control of the media, particularly the broadcast media. The admission of private operators into broadcasting in 1992 notwithstanding, the dominant player in the industry is still the government. The Federal Government owns the

majority of TV (NTA) and radio (FRCN) stations in the country. And with each state government also striving to own, operate and control TV and radio stations, government can be said to be the dominant player in the industry. As Akpan (2009) has noted, the multiplicity of channels has not led to the diversity of voices. Since one master – the government – has the channels, invariably the voice is one, notwithstanding from which part of the country it operates.

Similarly, but not surprisingly though, individuals who own and operate media outlets (both radio and TV) have their different political orientations with differing and fluctuating political fortunes. Such individuals may have connections with the government in power today but may not have tomorrow. Their political leanings are, therefore, critical to their survival (in all aspects) and to the operation of their media outlets.

Hence, ownership has grave implications for the practice of journalism across the landscape. The journalists' duty is primarily to satisfy the master (employer) who makes their daily living possible. The master does not seem to require much from the guard dog – all he wants is protection from the 'enemy', both within and without the establishment. The guard dog is to prevent harm to the master, and to accomplish this, the guard dog must accept (or pretend to accept) the viewpoints of his master as being true, reasonable and defensible. Once the guard dog takes this position, he will, without compulsion, canvas and promote the master's worldview, relegating to the background objectivity, balance, fairness and ethical considerations which are the hallmarks of professionalism. The option, most often, is always between daily living and assuming the master's voice on the one hand, and lack of means of livelihood and distancing oneself from the tune of the master. Oftentimes, the former – the need to survive, the need to take care of the family – is a stronger pull and decision maker for the journalist than the latter. This, then, explains why many of the media channels in Nigeria sing the tunes of their owners, and sing them passionately that one would think and assume that the tunes were originally theirs (the journalists)! In these circumstances, the lines are not just blurred but have become undistinguishable.

Naturally, the free – mixing of journalists and the politicians in a situation where the latter employ the former can only produce blurred lines. The changing political fortunes of media owners do not affect the blurred lines. If the owner of a media outlet belongs to the Opposition, his employees (journalists) must assume opposition stance. If fortunes change and the media owner is now in government, then tunes rendered

by journalists working in the outlet would also change, not only to support the government but also to condemn the new Opposition in their attempt to “discredit and bring down a democratically elected government”.

This holds true in every country. It holds true in Nigeria where a new government and a new Opposition emerged on May 29, 2015, following the victory of APC and loss by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the March 28, 2015 general elections. This demonstrates the seeming helplessness of journalists in these circumstances. As their bosses undergo transition, humming the tune of a new song, so do the journalists memorise the tune to present in their daily content in the media. Take the case of *The Nation* owned by Ahmed Tinubu. It has metamorphosed from an Opposition newspaper to the mouthpiece of the Buhari Government. The same could be said of Federal Government-owned organs – NTA and FRCN. They have gone through the sudden change from singing the tunes of PDP and the Transformation Agenda to the new tunes of Change and the APC. The metamorphosis has also taken place at the state level and has also affected other media establishments. In all this, the casualty is the journalists whose sense of direction and truth has been blurred by their association with the free-wheeling and dealing politicians.

ii. Conflict of Interest

According to Day (2006, p.211), “conflict of interest is a clash between professional loyalties and outside interests that undermines the credibility of the moral agent... Conflicts arise from the roles we play within the society and, for that reason, appear to involve particularistic duties rather than our general societal obligations”. The issue without conflicts of interest is that it is not binding on all; it affects journalists because of their roles.

For examples, while other persons in the society may endorse a political candidate, the journalist is not expected to do so because of societal expectations of him. While not all potential conflicts of interest may necessarily undermine the credibility of the moral agent, conflict of interest is always a threat, particularly when it emanates from the top. As Day (2006, p. 212) has stated:

The mass media are a big business and depend on advertisers for supports. The editorial side of the ledger is beholden to the commercial side for its daily bread. And many of these advertisers, particularly large corporations, could someday be

the subject of news stories. Whereas large newspapers and broadcast entities are better able to insulate their journalistic integrity from commercial pressures, smaller news operations might be forced to pull their punches to avoid coverage that would reflect unfavourably on the advertiser.

Some news organisations are owned and operated by parent companies. Their allegiance is more to the parent company than to journalistic independence. Loyalty – where it tilts to – affects the extent that the lines of independence are blurred.

Conflicts of interests manifest in at least three ways – conflicting relationships, conflict of participation as well as vested interests and hidden agendas (Day, 2006). In conflicting relationships many journalists belong to different bodies, even as they work for news organisations. A journalist's long-time relationship with a political party, for example, may undermine the professional detachment of the journalist and blur the line. This long standing relationship is often serviced mutually – i.e. it is not without motivations. While the journalist launders the image of the organisation and its officials, he is often rewarded with special treatment, including trips, gifts, lunch etc. In some developed countries, detachment is emphasized, but in Nigeria the reverse is the case. News organisations, rightly or wrongly, canvas for these, particularly 'junket', - a free trip (and perhaps food and lodging) paid for by some vested interest or news source. It is public relations for the company but that which erodes the line between the news organisation and the company.

Journalists travel with political candidates that they cover, with the latter providing for their welfare. This makes the line of distinction thinner every day until it disappears. In such circumstances, the journalist is embedded with extreme negative consequences for professionalism. Day (2006) has summarised the dangers thus:

- i. The politicians are not motivated by were humanistic or altruistic instincts; they want favourable coverage.
- ii. The public may still suspect that the coverage by the journalist is influenced.
- iii. There is certain hypocrisy in journalists exposing politicians and other powerbrokers who are 'on the take' and yet being the recipients of perks from outside sources.
- iv. There may be direct pressure from the gift givers for favourable coverage.

As humans, journalists have personal relationships with others, including news sources that may be related by blood. Under such circumstances, it may be difficult for the journalist to maintain a sense of detachment. What about the demands of patriotism to a country on the journalist? Unfortunately, the demands on the journalist as a professional and a citizen are not mutually exclusive – a situation that makes it difficult for the journalist to prevent the line from blurring.

In conflict of participation, many journalists in Nigeria are card-carrying members of political parties and community organisations that have direct and indirect links with the parties. These associations (which are pseudo-political parties) are sponsored by politicians; hence they willingly endorse their godfather and their political platforms. Nothing is more worrisome to news executives than reporters who harbour political ambitions while working as journalists.

Some journalists do have vested interests and hidden agendas. The interests are often personal and undisclosed but have the potency to blur professional lines.

iii. Competition for Audience

Although much of the blurred line could be externally motivated, the media, in their competition for survival, sometimes engage in activities which may compromise their independence as an institution. The drive for interesting news items; the push for exclusives; the desire to establish a reputation for reliability in order to outdo the competition, often push a news organisation to align with some politicians and government officials for scoops. Such an alliance appears to tie the viability of the news outlet and its supremacy over its rivals to the apron strings of the political actors, who, operating on the basis of appropriate reward, must extract their due from such a news organisation if they are to cooperate and make that alliance 'effective' and symbiotic. The rule of engagement is simple: "If you must get scoops and exclusives from us, then you must protect our interest". 'Protection of interest' implies supporting them, turning a blind eye if need be, censuring detractors and generally canvassing their view points. As Besley, Burgess and Prat (2002) and Akpan (2009) have noted, this is media capture.

iv. The Media Capture

By media capture is meant "the control of the media by external forces, such that the media are ingratiated or give favourable coverage where they would ordinarily not have given. It is the act of buying off a particular medium or the entire mass media institution" (Akpan, 2009, p.311). The

politician, government and its officials or the businessman or institution that is at the receiving end of perceived unfavourable media coverage has the tendency to attempt to 'capture' the 'offensive' media in order to influence their contents.

Besley *et al* (2002, pp.51-52) list the various forms of media capture which then blurs the line between the media and others they were supposed to watch. These include bribes, threats, suppression (where government seizes and confiscates the printing plates of newspaper and magazines or closes down a TV or radio station, laws (to directly or indirectly punish the stubborn media outlet by making it difficult for it to operate), beneficial regulations (in favour of the compliant media outlet) and public relations gestures. Others are ingratiation as well as rents which Stiglitz (2002, p. 40) describes as "a situation where public officials disclose secrets to those members of the press that treat them well", while ignoring the hostile press.

Collusion between Journalism and Politics

Generally speaking, there is always collusion between news sources and reporters – and is a situation in which mutual interest exists between news sources and the media. McQuail (2005, p. 324) calls it 'assimilation'. It "arises when there exists a mutual interest on the part of the media and would-be external communicators (advocates and news sources)". This applies to sources such as politicians, government officials, police etc. McQuail explains that assimilation can be said to occur if the degree of collaboration which exists for mutual benefit between the reporter and source reaches a point where it conflicts with the 'distributive' role normally expected from those who claim to inform the public.

The collusion between journalists and news sources is exacerbated by their seeming mutual interdependence (Udoakah, 2014). McQuail(2005, pp. 321 – 322) capture it aptly:

Relations with news sources are essential to news media and they often constitute a very active two-way process. The news media are always looking for suitable content; and content (not always suitable) is always looking for an outlet in the news. News people also have their preferred sources and are also linked to prominent figures by institutional means – press conference, publicity agents and so on.

The seeming the symbiosis notwithstanding, the politicians go into the relationship with the undeclared motive to blur the line and consequently influence coverage to their advantage: "The process of

attempting to influence news has accelerated in line with modern techniques of campaigning and opinion measurement. Political parties, government agencies and all the major institutions employ news managers and 'spin doctors' whose task is to maximize the favourable presentation of policy and action and minimize any negative aspect...there is almost certainly an increasing importance attached to 'symbolic politics', whether or not it is effective" (McQuail, 2005, p. 325).

Implications of the Blurring Lines

The failure to have distinct lines between journalists and those that they report bring forth some consequences.

- i. It makes the audience to question the credibility of both the journalist and his medium. When it is glaring that a particular medium is attached to a particular political viewpoint, the credibility level of such a medium drops drastically. By extension, those who work for the medium also lose their credibility. In the eyes of right-thinking persons, the medium is seen as an appendage of the political party or government or politician that it supports.
- ii. It becomes difficult to distinguish the viewpoint of the medium and its employees from the viewpoint of their 'master' – those that they report. Having been labelled the mouthpiece of a particular government or political party, such a medium finds it rather difficult to distance itself from the government or party.
- iii. Arising from the points above, the medium and its staff are given labels – by words or sobriquets which derogatorily identify them with or attach them to a political party or government or even individual. For instance, many state government-controlled media outlets are derisively named after the governors of those states – not because the governors fund them or fund them well, but because they are at the whims of those governors.
- iv. Even innocent bystanders also suffer. News organisations that tilt more towards objectivity and balance, and are not attached, may also be lumped into the group of news outlets with low credibility. Some audience members, particularly the lazy and less critical ones, may regard all news outlets as the same- producers of the biased content.
- v. The blurring lines cause the news organisation to be tied to the fortunes of the government or political party. While the news organisation may not be readily identified with the success of the party or government, it is fully associated with the failures of the

government or the political party. The failure embarrasses the medium and many push it out of business.

- vi. On the whole, it whittles down the power of the media and casts aspersions on their role as an impartial arbiter in the affairs of governance.

Can the Line be made visible?

In a society where newspapers as well as radio and television stations are established for political reasons; and in a situation where the journalists are held hostage by the need to make ends meet and pick their bills, it is rather a difficult task to declare that the blurring lines could ever be separated, unless such as one would want to post an utopian disposition. Media trends in Nigeria suggest that many emerging media outlets support or have sympathies for one political party or the other. To that extent, they are not free, contrary to their claims, to discharge their professional duties without any let or hindrance. The fact that media business is capital intensive circumscribes entry into the business, and thus leave only those with enormous financial muscle to enter and compete in the industry. Nowadays, with capital as the driving force, there seems to be no room for investors who can no longer sustain the operations of their media outlets – they are forced to capitulate into mergers and outright acquisitions of their once vibrant media empire.

The reality is that those with the financial resources to take over weak media establishments or establish new ones are not mere entrepreneurs – they have their political leanings, albeit covert. They see their media outlets as a platform for them to realise their political goals.

In the light of the above, separating the line or making the line visible is a long short, not something in the short-run. In the short-term, journalists working for a particular medium are expected to understand and frame their output appropriately. They are expected to do this to maintain their jobs. On his own, the journalist can achieve nothing; he would not want to jeopardise his future and that of his family. Therefore it is as much an individual as it is a collective task.

The Nigeria Union of Journalists and other related bodies should collectively engage media proprietors, and by so doing constantly knock on the doors of freedom and professional independence, which would not come on a platter. The frontiers of freedom and professionalism would be shifted slowly and gradually through constructive engagement with the media proprietors.

Beyond the above, the cleansing of the profession is an urgent necessity. It is a fact that quacks in the profession are more desperate

and therefore more susceptible to blur the line than those who have met the prerequisites to practice. However, cleansing is made a little herculean by State chairmen of the NUJ who shamelessly admit quacks into the profession for political reasons – they rely on the votes of the quacks to perpetuate themselves in office. It is believed that as the NUJ engages in self-cleansing, it is also making a statement on media professionalism.

It is rather unfortunate that many of the emerging tabloids do not pay their staff but would rather encourage them to blackmail politicians or align with them for money – which ever works better. This is akin to encouraging romance between the goat and the lion. It is an unequal relationship that keeps one in permanent subjugation to the other. One lives at the mercy of the other. Any media proprietor who cannot remunerate his staff has no business remaining in the industry – he should shut the doors immediately. Otherwise, let him pay them their due. It helps to keep the mind of the journalist a little independent.

When there are conflicts of interest, the first step is to recognize the existence of such conflicts. Pretending that conflicts do not exist does not help matters. Pretence does not take away the ensnarement that conflict situations generate. This applies to the news organisation as well as the individual journalist. When conflict of interest is acknowledged, it makes it possible for the issues involved to be discussed and possible solutions found. Pretensions of non existence of conflicts situations may deepen the conflict.

Journalists are human and as Day (2006, p. 220) states, “Journalists cannot be social hermits and retreat from all involvement in their communities”. However, they are still under a moral obligation to disclose such conflicts to the public. Some may argue that membership in a political party may not cause the reporter to be bias. This position is unsustainable. If working in a politically biased media outlet makes the journalist to compromise his reportage, how much more one who holds membership in a political party! Outright political activism by journalists is likely to be viewed as a partisan undertaking, which it is (Day, 2006). Political activism includes financial and intellectual contributions. When a journalist takes a highly visible political role, it undermines the credibility of his medium.

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