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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mass Media News Processes, Manufacture of Consent and the Integrity of the Public Sphere

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Introduction

Everyday in Nigeria unfolds one event or another which tends to give credence to the media as the Fourth Estate of the realm. The media, in this role, are seen as independent sources of daily intelligence in the polity, while at the same time protecting the people from possible abuse by the power elite. In their humble beginnings, the media might have striven to measure up to societal expectations of independence; however, the growing complexities in the society today, not made least by powerful business and political interests, sometimes draw the media away from protecting the people in favour of originating support for the ruling elite in the society. For the ruling elite, media support is crucial as a way of cultivating the consent of the governed to legitimise their authority. McNair (2002, p. 62) rightly notes that, "consent has to be constantly worked for by those who currently constitute the ruling elite of the society."

Quite aware that popular consent, though much sought after, is always at the risk of being withdrawn, the political elite use the media as the starting point for the mobilisation of authority and consent. Through the processes of news gathering and production, the media are active definers of political reality, and present the audience with a finished product that articulates what, in the consideration of the political elite, is an acceptable version of reality. Herman and Chomsky (1994) define the manufacture of consent as, "a complex process whereby powerful interests inside democracies...create in the public mind patterns of acceptance" (cited in Watson and Hill, 2006, p.59). In manufacturing consent, the media, on behalf of the power elite, select and shape material that aligns with the interests and values of those who exercise control, such that the audience seem to have no choice but to accept the version of reality presented to them as true. This may involve manipulation, suppression and/or falsification of information - a form of media hegemony.

A situation where the information on which the citizens base political behaviour is manufactured and not objective truth has implications for the polity in general and the media as the public sphere. This article, among other things, highlights how media news processes, wittingly or unwittingly, result in situations where the audience does not give consent to the ruling elite based on conviction, but because the media have presented with no alternative. The article also discusses the public sphere and how it could be affected by the manufacture of consent by the media.

Theoretical Framework

This article is hinged on two media theories that are somewhat related to each other. These are the gatekeeping theory and the conspiracy theory. The gatekeeping theory was developed in 1965 by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge in an attempt to ascertain why editors preferred a particular news item to the other. McQuail (2005, p. 308) states that gatekeeping, "has been widely used as a metaphor to describe the process by which selections are made in media work, especially decisions regarding whether or not to allow a particular news report to pass through the 'gates' of a news medium into the wider news channels...in a wider sense it refers to the power to give or withhold access to different voices in a society and is often a locus of conflict." Expatiating the concept of gatekeeping, Watson (2003, p.123) notes that, "gatekeeping is about opening or closing the channels of communication; it is about accessing or refusing access." To reach its intended target, "every MESSAGE has to pass through many 'gates'; some will be wide open, some ajar, some tightly closed" (Watson and Hill, 2006, p. 110).

The gatekeeping theory is concerned with selection – who selects the news and on what basis. Here lies the relevance of this model

to this article: the media, through their editors and reporters, using a set of pre-determined criteria, select, and by the same token reject, news items that pass through the 'news gates' of their organisation. These criteria include, but are not limited to, values, norms and traditional wisdom of the organisation for which the gatekeeper works, the gatekeeper's class, background, upbringing and education as well as his world views (Watson and Hill, 2006). The argument is that for all the claims to impartiality, objectivity and fairness by media operatives, the selection of news is consciously made to sustain the values which are directly or indirectly geared to win the consent of the people for the continued dominance of the ruling elite.

Related to gatekeeping is the conspiracy theory. The theory is concerned with the practice of manipulating messages in order to support those who own the means of communication, their social class and their interests. The theory holds that the media shape their messages to underpin existing social, economic and political conditions. Thus, the media (would) strive to maintain the existing social, economic and political order by presenting content in a way that would win the support (consent) of the governed for the ruling elite. In the end, therefore, the consent given is not, strictly speaking, freely given, but is based on the manipulated information with which they have been presented and in which they do not have a choice.

Media Hegemony

Hegemony is achieved, according to Watson and Hill (2006, p.121), "when a provisional alliance of certain social groups exerts a consensus that makes the power of the dominant group appear both natural and legitimate." These social groups include the mass media, the family and religion, and they are central in shaping people's awareness and consciousness. Therefore, they become instruments with which the ruling elite control and dominate the governed. Guyun Williams, quoted in Miliband (1973, p.162), is more diffuse in defining hegemony:

An order in which a certain way
of life and thought is dominant,
in which one concept of reality

is diffused throughout the society in all its institutional and private manifestation, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political and all social institutions, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations.

But as Watson and Hill (2006, p.121) stress, "hegemony can, however, be maintained only by the *won consent* of the dominated." Here the media intrinsically function in a dual role – they win the consent of the dominated and at the same time maintain and sustain that won consent – all through their production.

The media are, in the least, a crucial element in the legitimisation of the policies of the ruling elite. Sometimes the media exhibit seemingly endless differences in their content, much of which appears to be hostile to the ruling elite. This is only to the extent of the divisions among the ruling elite such that the differences in content are only a reflection of the different dispositions of the elite at a particular time. The differences notwithstanding, the media share one strong characteristic, and that is their passionate hostility to anything that may threaten the status quo. That explains why the media are quick to label a union strike as unnecessary and the striking workers as unpatriotic. As Miliband (1973) points out, this profoundly conformist outlook admits of many variations and deviations; it certainly does not preclude a critical view of this or that aspect of the existing order of things.

Television and radio in particular claim a high level of objectivity and impartiality. Yet these assumed impartiality and objectivity are artificial. They mainly operate in regard to political formations which, while divided on many issues, are nevertheless part of a basic underlying consensus. Miliband (1973, p. 200) notes that: Impartiality and objectivity, in this sense, stop at the point where political consensus itself ends - and the more radical the dissent, the less impartial and objective the media. On this view it does not seem extravagant to suggest that radio and TV have been consistent and

predominant agencies of conservative indoctrination and that they have done what they could to inoculate their listeners and viewers against dissident thought.

In their hegemonic role, the ruling elite which cut across political parties and even church groups have 'psychological monopoly' of the media – a situation in which news and comments, entertainment, advertising, political, rhetoric and religious exhortations are more concerned with channelling existing beliefs than with radically changing them. When the elite succeed in mobilising consent, they become hegemonic and have no need, therefore, to protect the social structure by coercion and force of arms. Citizens are conditioned by the media to accept the offering of the ruling elite. As Hallin (1987, p.18) observes, "to say the media play a hegemonic role is to say that they contribute to the maintenance of consent for a system of power."

The media here are not thought to show bias, but are central to reinforcing and reproducing a generalised popular consensus about the inherent viability of the system as a whole. For Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1991, p. 12):

> Hegemony addresses how superordinates manufacture and sustain support for their dominance over subordinates through dissemination and reproduction of knowledge that favours their interests, and how subordinates alternatively accept and contest their knowledge...Journalists and their news organisations are key players in hegemonic processes. They do not simply report events, but participate in them and act as protagonists.

The hegemonic role of the media could be benign. For as McNair (2002, p.6) says: "the media provide the social structure with an outlet for the expression of shared values (as well as the political function of rational information)." In the process, therefore, the media provide the parameters of legitimate consent, and present the citizens, through their daily reports and analyses, with a world view that is consistent with the maintenance of the status quo.

The media do engage in self-rectifying mechanism, especially in cases that disunity and fragmentation of the ruling elite seem eminent. Coverage of issues that are anti-establishment may not actually threaten the system. It could be some form of tokenism, show of independence, power and prestige and, at best, superficial. This is an accommodation of the breakdown of consensus and splitting of elite groups which may lead to the rotation of elites (Dowse and Hughes, 1986).

News Processes and Manufacture of Consent

News processes refer to the series of stages that news items go through before they are eventually published by a news medium. These processes, in most cases, are unwritten, and for reporters and editors working in the medium, internalising these processes is a compelling duty. In this era of globalisation, access to the day's intelligence has become an important part of the daily life of individuals, groups, communities and nations. And since the world is too tumultuous and events too fleeting for an individual to personally experience, people tend to rely on news in the media to access such intelligence. This dependence gives the mass media and their content – news in particular – some primacy in shaping the thoughts and visions of the audience. To the extent of audience dependence on the mass media, to that extent has the media's major product – news – become a tool of manipulation in the hands of government and business elite.

Ordinarily news should represent the reality. However, it is so much constructed that at any point, news is just a version of the reality, implying that other versions of reality exist. Although every organisation claims to be guided by news values, the interpretation of those values determines their application – that is, which news item is

selected for use and how it is used. The interpretation and application of news determinants are subject to newsroom processes which find expression in news framing, gatekeeping and pseudo events.

News Framing

Framing, according to McQuail (2005, p. 555), "refers to the way in which news content is typically shaped and contextualised by journalists within some familiar frame of reference and according to some latent structure of meaning by reference to certain news values that connect one event with similar ones." News framing has to do with election and, according to Entman (1993), frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies. McQuail (2005) argues that the media use certain words or phrases, certain contextualised references, picture or films to enhance framing.

News frameworks, Watson and Hill (2006, p.191) explain, "consist of a shared set of assumptions by reporters and editors about what is newsworthy. These assumptions influence the selection of items for investigation and reporting and to some extent how they will be presented. This set of assumptions also enables journalists to relate news items to an image of society in order to give them meaning." Since the media are often in an unstated liaison with the political and economic elite of the society, news content is thus framed to support the elite whose patronage – sometimes coming by way of favourable policies, advertising revenue, 'rents' or harsh laws on the competition – is very crucial to the survival of the media. Any content that is at variance with the values held by the organisation becomes a square peg in a round frame!

Media owners need not, and often do not, tell the journalists what to do but the shared understanding of the frame through which news would pass to the public serves to make the reporters and editors publish content that supports the status quo. Therefore, once a news item has been selected for publication there is already bias, some selective principle, some value, quite apart from the way it is presented. Framing makes news a product and not a natural phenomenon emerging from reality. McNair (1994, p.30) has argued that "news and journalism.. are social *constructions*...news is never a mere recording

or reporting of the world 'out there', but a synthetic, value-laden account which carries within it the dominant assumptions and ideas of the society within which it is produced," such that the governed are persuaded to accept the utterances, actions and inactions of government officials as sincere. McNair (1994, p.38) further states that:

> Journalism is part of the stratified social system, part of the apparatus by which that system is presented to its members in terms which they can be persuaded to live with. Thus, the media tend to construct accounts of events which are structured and framed by the dominant values and interests of that society, and to marginalise (if not necessarily exclude) alternative accounts.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is closely related to framing. As already noted in this discourse, gatekeeping, in the practical sense, implies the power of the media to grant or withhold access to the differing voices in the society. Watson (2003) observes that gatekeeping is about accessing or refusing access. He adds that gatekeeping is intricately dependent on news values, just as framing. However, while framing may deal more with constructing the content to fit the frame, gatekeeping is more concerned with access or denial. The gates of news are constructed with news values which are in turn shaped by the values of the news organisation. Just as the man at the gatehouse demands to know the mission of the visitor, the news gatekeeper – reporters and editors – demands with insistence to ascertain the importance of news items. The importance, quite interestingly, is judged by a news item's contribution to the maintenance of a system which has provided the channel for the airing

of the news.

Gatekeeping involves censorship, modification or distortion of news content before it is let through the medium's gate. Watson (2003, p.124) vividly captures the demands of gatekeeping on reporters and editors:

> Reporters with leftist political leanings working on a rightist newspaper, will, if they wish to stay on the payroll, gatekeep pre-emptively: that is, they will be selective about the stories they submit for publication. Knowing that certain stories (sympathetic to the left, for example) would simply not be published – so why waste time and effort in submitting them?

As Watson alludes to above, self-regulation is part of the process of gatekeeping. The media are sometimes expected by government to engage in a degree of reciprocal gatekeeping as a condition for access. "Government may apply 'rents' – a situation where public officials disclose secrets to those members of the press that treat them well" (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 40) - with the insistence that the journalists involved should close the gates to news that government considers hostile. Government may also insist that the information released should be used 'properly,' as any improper use can deny the journalists further privileged access to government news sources.

Gatekeeping occurs at different stages in the news production process. The editor selects the event to be covered, the personnel to cover and the quality and quantity of equipment available. The reporter, by virtue of being at the scene, has a degree of choice on what features of an event to select, and the slant of reporting. On the desk of the news editor, the news copy is subjected to fresh gatekeeping demands – to balance the demands of one story against another, and, most importantly, in accordance with the organisation's norms and

values.

Sometimes the personnel whose views are not in tandem with the established, official values of the organisation may be denied access to the public at the news gate. Thus, access through the gate is not solely by news content. Invariably, both content and personnel considered to be serving interests other than the established one, or who are thought to have compromised the values of the news organisation or the source of news can be shut out. Just as the gatekeeper to a house has a duty to open or shut the gate to accepted or unaccepted guests respectively based on the shared assumption on who should or should not be allowed in, the editor or reporter keeps watch at the news gate to grant passage to news content that will not only help to sustain the news organisation, but will, ultimately, place the government and business elite in good standing before the public.

In times of crisis, government uses the television more than any other mass medium to attempt to influence the consent of the masses. For example, in times of strike by labour or demonstration by civil society groups and students, the NTA is often used to label the striking workers or the protesters as deviants. Where government feels that the protest or strike is beyond permissible limits, the NTA is particularly called to duty to turn the back of the masses against the protesters or striking labour. Often NTA would intervene to label these activities as 'illegitimate', marginalise them and divert public attention from the root causes of the conflict. Similarly, the station would come up with documentaries and current affairs programmes that condemn the strike or protest and justify government's response to the situation. With carefully selected pictures and incisive sound bytes, the television station would disparage the unionists and label them as unpatriotic, greedy, inconsiderate and products of the opposition. All these are done in order to win the interest and attention of the audience and gain audience assent or approval. Through gatekeeping, television reproduces the definitions of the powerful without, in the least, being in their pay. By reporting problematic events and processes in a manner favourable to the established order, television, as in the case of NTA and other government-controlled channels, contribute to the manufacture and maintenance of consent.

Gatekeeping also finds expression in the concealment of information engineered by political actors and executed by the media.

What citizens receive as political information in the public sphere is sometimes an incomplete and partial picture of reality. Manipulation of opinions and concealment or suppression of inconvenient information are strategies emanating from political actors themselves and pursued through the media institution.

A form of gatekeeping is the dependence on existing structures for news. Today's news media place reporters at legitimated institutions where stories supposedly appealing to contemporary news consumers are expected to be found. And these institutions and those who lead them are primary definers of news. They are structures of dominance within which the representatives of power elite tend to enjoy privileged access to the media. For example, it is the people who run government structures whose opinions are always sought, particularly in times of crisis such as demonstrations and industrial action. This is not done in error but to use the opinions of those who manage the structures to reinforce official positions, manipulate opinion and solicit the consent of the governed for government and against the 'deviants,' 'society's undesirables,' or disgruntled elements.'

In the course of news production, journalists, face the constraints of man hours, space and airtime. Within these constraints, events are far more likely to get onto the news agenda if they come from official structures. It is because of the demands of time and deadline, journalists are inclined to position themselves so that they have ready access to institutions which guarantee a useful volume of reportable activity at useful intervals.

Pseudo-events
Pseudo-events are events which are primarily staged to create a favourable image for the newsmakers. Such events include interviews with government leaders, news leaks, press conferences, etc. All these provide materials which are happily and readily taken up by the media as news to fill newspaper columns and broadcast airtime. This creates a mutual dependence between the politician and the media professional. Pseudo-events are primarily what they are subjective, biased and deceptive, and are sprinkled with elegance and style, and packaged as good governance. Writing as far back as 1962, Borstin held that the

staging of pseudo-events is indeed part of the democratic process, but its chief goal is to project a favourable image for the government and its ruling elite such that the audience would consent to their actions or inactions:In a democratic society…freedom of speech and the press and of broadcasting includes freedom to create pseudo-events. Competing politicians, newsmen and news media contest in this creation. They vie with each other in offering attractive, 'informative' accounts and images of the world. They are free to speculate on facts, to bring new facts to being, to demand answers to their own contrived questions (cited in McNair, 2002, p. 70).

Public Sphere and the Manufacture of Consent
According to Boyd-Barrett the concept of 'public sphere' derives from a 1962 work by Jürgen Habermas which highlighted the practice of open exchange of views and discussion about issues of general social importance. It is about the formation of a sense of the 'public,' not as an abstract principle, but as a culturally-embedded social practice. Boyd-Barret (1995, p. 230) further points out that:

> Habermas elevated the 18th Century coffee house as a bourgeois 'pubic sphere,' an ideal forum within which newspapers and journals were read and discussed in face-to-face groups, whose discussions were framed with reference to and on behalf of broader social interests than merely the interests of those who were physically present, and which helped to transform the relationship between aristocracy and the business classes.

McQuail (2005, p.181) on his part, states that "in general, public sphere

refers to a notional 'space' which provides a more or less autonomous and open criteria or forum for public debate." Access to the space is free, and the likelihood exists for pubic association and debate leading to the formation of public opinion. .

Overtime, the mass media have become the key institution of the public sphere. They serve as a public sphere to provide a forum for debate and communicative interchange among the citizens. The public sphere encourages critical reflection on what is brought to the sphere (Watson and Hill, 2006). It provides a space between state and private citizens to interact, and creates awareness on politics and other facets of life, including involvement in public debate. The modern public sphere – many years after the initial sphere which arose from the bourgeoisie coffee house – was created by journalism (Watson and Hill, 2006). The nature of the public sphere demands that it be a neutral zone to enable all citizens, status notwithstanding, to access and participate in it. A key and necessary ingredient for the success of the public sphere is insulation from control by the state as opposed to political control.

In view of the above, what are the implications of the manufacture of consent on the operation of the public sphere? First, the public sphere, as stated by Watson and Hill (2006), is supposed to be a neutral zone. However: If the information on which political behaviour is based, or can be, manufactured artifice rather than objective truth, the integrity of the public sphere is inevitably diminished. To the extent that citizens are subject to manipulation, rather than exposed to information, democracy loses its authenticity and becomes something more sinister (McNair, 2002, p.66).

Secondly, if much of the information is manipulated to gain the consent of the governed, it means that within the public sphere there is the absence of the genuine choice or pluralism. Some, if not all the voices within the media tend to hum and sing the same tune – all geared towards legitimising the position of those in power.

Where news content is a constructed artifice rather than the objective truth, the media can cease to be an agency of empowerment, having surrendered, unintentionally at times, the role of watch dog and become a means by which the public is sidelined and public opinion manipulated. At that point, the public sphere ceases to be a neutral zone.

Access becomes highly restricted but granted only to those whose input services the structures of governance with a view to maintaining the hegemony of the ruling elite. Whereas the public sphere was created for debates and critical reflection on the state of the polity, the manufacturing of consent through news content robs the sphere of the very ingredients that give it credibility and integrity – free, easy access and public debate.

By its nature, the public sphere is expected to provide the space between the state and private citizens. However, in a situation where there is no objective debate and communicative interchange between the political actors and the governed, the quality of input from the media arising from interactions in the public sphere is limited and almost nearly restricted to those which tend to support the existing political and economic structures. The situation is complicated as journalists are not accountable to the public which they claim to serve.

Towards a less manufactured consent

There is no doubt that government as the highest representation of the state has the right to survive. Its stability is essential to the well being of the polity and the citizens. To achieve this, government is not, and should not, always be at the receiving end of media content. It has the right and duty to also canvass critical support for its programmes and policies in the media. Without this the government would be a lameduck in the hands of its critics as well as the powerful media elite. The citizens, on the other hand, would be deprived of an opportunity to test the claims of critics of government. The public sphere would lose its appeal in the absence of the essential interactivity and debate that give credence to it.

Therefore, it is imperative for the public sphere to retain its 'publicness' through easy and free access to the sphere. When both the government and the citizens have unfettered access to the public sphere, and both engage in meaningful debates and interactions, the quality of the public sphere is somewhat assured. The audience – members of the public – would then be in a position to decide, based on conviction, the necessity or otherwise of giving consent to the policies and programmes of government.

It may be a long shot to think that government would, willingly, lessen its manipulation of messages it sends to the public. However, since the construction of social reality can only be achieved through and by the aid of the mass media, the media should offer themselves less for manipulation by government. If the mass media truly live to their calling as the 4th Estate, casting a watchful eye on the other estates, they would be less fertile for government's manipulative activities. Government would be persuaded to be more objective and more truthful in its dealings with the public, such that the consent of the governed, which it desperately craves, is more a conviction than manufactured artifice.

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