

## WHEN (NOT) TO BE A PROPRIETOR: NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER OWNERSHIP IN A CHANGING POLITY

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**ABSTRACT** The Nigerian press has seen different kinds of ownership ranging from missions, groups, and individuals to governments. Yet ownership of some newspapers remained obscure and a subject of speculation. Beyond the traditional functions, Nigerian newspapers have served purposes that diverged from their professed philosophy or ideologies. Despite travails particularly during the long military rule, and the seeming unprofitability of most ventures, newspapers have continued to proliferate. Ownership is central to the functionality, style, outlook, survival and perception of newspapers. These issues raise some fundamental questions as to why various parties venture into newspaper ownership, or desire to retain ownership when it is risky or economically unwise to do so. Using historical analysis approaches, the authors argue that the glamour and self-fulfilment in newspaper proprietorship as well as the parochial interest which some newspapers have served allure their owners and even encourage the addition of new titles even when other dynamics point to the contrary.

**Key Words:** Newspapers; Ownership; Proliferation; Politics; Profitability; Nation-Building; Historical Analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

The press remains an important institution all over the world. Its centrality to communication is not in doubt (Lazarfeld & Merton, 1971: 554–578; Mueller, 1976; Rubin, 1997: 104–106). In the performance of its public watchdog role, the press serves as a behavioural regulatory agent on the activities of government and its functionaries (Kolawole, 1998). The relationship between the mass media and democracy is acknowledged to be more than incidental (Donsbach, 1995; Schudson, 1997). Whereas the mass media are functional contributors to the evolution of democracy and democratic ideals, democracy is the sustaining and nurturing power of the mass media. In its over one hundred and fifty years of existence in Nigeria, the press has become an integral part of the country's history and evolution. Described as one of the most vibrant in Africa, the press in Nigeria contributed to the decolonization process and the promotion of nationalism (Coleman, 1971: 133–187; Omu, 1974: 521–539; Olukotun, 2003: 229–246) and politics (Sklar & Whitaker, 1964: 597–654; Agbaje, 1992). In addition, its appraisal of the evolution, growth and travails of the Nigerian nation (Bamiduro, 1983: 107–125; Adebani, 2002: 143–156) as well as its examination of the impact of authoritarian regimes on press development and performance (Bourgault, 1995; Thompson, 1997) are remarkable. Given that the existence and functioning of a

vibrant civil society is central to a functional democracy, the role of the newspapers as significant players that define the public sphere and ensure plurality in the perception of national and local issues would be appreciated. The significance of a vibrant press free from manipulation underscores the relevance of analyzing newspaper ownership that reveals the possibilities and limits of independent expression in building the national polity.

The above is ever more important for a country such as Nigeria that has gone through a conflict-ridden process of modernization. Arguably, the extent of independence of newspapers has played a part in the quality of its contribution to the development of democracy and democratic culture in Nigeria.

Whether at the individual, group or government level, the involvement in newspaper ownership in Nigeria is significant. As argued by Dare (1997: 543–544), the Nigerian press before the 1990s was dominated by government-owned newspapers, but it was the privately-owned newspapers and magazines that exerted the most influence on public policy. Whereas the motive of profit maximization was strong in the desire for newspaper ownership particularly as a business concern (Azikiwe, 2004: 291), such a motive according to Dare (1997: 543) was mostly a mirage. Rather, it was the capacity of a publisher to sustain losses continually that sustains a publication. The willingness to put up with these losses presupposes the existence of a different motive other than a mere desire to disseminate news and information to the public. This according to Dare (1997) explains why newspapers served all kinds of competing interests, and have been subjected to all kinds of editorial control, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly with the influences that are brought to bear on the press, ranging from ethnic, political, religious to economic.

In justifying the need for government involvement in newspaper publication, Coker (1968: 109–110) contended that already in the 1960s, privately-owned newspapers were sophisticated political weapons in the hands of their owners who had political ambitions. The need to counter or mediate their influence and also project itself partly explains government involvement. Thus the common assumption that, in journalism, the sacred trust that a journalist's total responsibility should be to his audience rather than his proprietor was not applicable to the political press in Nigeria, as newspaper proprietors used their press to feather their nests (Coker, 1968: 109–110). Implicitly, the usefulness of the newspapers in serving a particular cause, promoting an agenda or popularizing and defending the proprietors' political career came to occupy central position. This accounted for the reason why newspapers struggled hard to survive despite the hostile operating environment from the late nineteenth century (Omu, 1978: 73–95, 171–203; Oloyede, 2004: 44, 68–69, 117–119). The proliferation of newspapers in modern times also explains the significance of newspaper ownership. Specifically, the direct or indirect contemporary involvement of rich politicians, mostly serving or former governors, retired military officers, and former newspaper editors in newspaper ownership is an indication of the tremendous influence and patronage associated with newspaper ownership.

However because there are tremendous challenges associated with newspaper ownership, newspapers' travails under different dispensations and its changing

**Table 1.** Newspapers per decade of establishment.

Papers	1880-1890	1891-1900	1901-1910	1911-1920	1921-1930	1931-1937	Total
Daily	-	-	-	-	7	4	11
Weekly	3	5	2	2	13	8	33
Fortnightly	3	-	-	-	-	-	3
Monthly	1	-	1	1	1	-	4
Irregular	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	7	5	3	3	21	12	51

Source: Omu (1978: 77).

**Table 2.** Variations in the duration of the newspapers.

Duration of newspapers	Frequency of publication					Total
	Daily	Weekly	Fortnightly	Monthly	Irregular	
Under 1 year	6	10	-	-	-	16
Up to 3 years	1	7	2	2	-	12
Up to 5 years	-	11	-	1	-	12
Up to 7 years	-	4	1	-	-	5
10 years and above	4	11	-	-	-	15

Source: Omu (1978: 77).

fortunes, and high mortality rate (Tables 1 and 2),<sup>(1)</sup> it is important to examine the basis for its proliferation which was an indication of the continued interest in newspaper ownership. To probe deeper into newspaper ownership is to examine the discrepancy in the newspaper ambition and performance, the secrecy surrounding some newspapers' ownership, and the refusal of newspapers to formally declare their political allegiance despite showing open bias for different political interests.

## EXPLAINING NEWSPAPERS' OWNERSHIP: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CLARIFICATIONS

In explaining the impact of ownership on newspapers, the political economy of communication as an area of study offers some insights. Generally conceived as a study that focuses on mass media industry structures with an emphasis on the effects of ownership on political systems, its relevance derives from its pertinence in understanding how communication figures in political economic formations. Obviously derived from the concept of "knowledge monopolies," as developed by Canadian economist, Harold Innis (1951), its use in illustrating how certain privileged groups including priests, kings, bureaucrats, soldiers and scientists enjoy a monopoly of access to certain kinds of knowledge forms the basis of this concept (Graham, 2007: 226–245).

Central to the political economy of communication is the concern with "propaganda." Despite the automatic negative connotations it carries presently, the

term is conceived as the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols. Whereas attitude is taken to mean a tendency to act according to certain patterns of evaluation, its existence is not a direct datum of experience, but an inference from science which has a conventionalized significance. Included in the valuational patterns upon which this inference is founded are primitive gestures of the face and body, or more sophisticated gestures of the pen and voice which taken together have a standard meaning in a group and are called significant symbols. Such significant symbols like the elevated eyebrow, the clenched fist, the sharp voice, and the pungent phrase have their preferences established within the web of a particular culture and are paraphernalia employed in expressing the attitudes, and also capable of being employed to reaffirm or redefine attitudes (Lasswell, 1927: 627).

In a similar vein, Bernays (1928: 958–961) saw propaganda from the broadest standpoint as the power of the ruling group to sway the larger public in its attitude with such psychological techniques as public persuasion and sociological techniques including statistics and field-surveys. The political economic understanding of communication by Lasswell (1927) and Bernays (1928) placed an increasing emphasis on the role of communication in the production of values and power as well as on the relationship between economic and political power. However, the mainstream in the field holds the purely monetary dimension as the definition of value, and its primary object of study, a seeming monolithic media. Of all the mainstream studies that focus on mass media ownership and its broad societal effects, the works of Herman and Chomsky (1988), and McChesney (2000) are pertinent.

Herman and Chomsky (1988) view media as businesses interested in the sale of products to other businesses, rather than that of quality of public news. Ownership therefore is considered the most important determinant of the type of news that is presented in the news media. Other determinants are the sources of news and media funding. As the source of media biases, ownership colours or censors news items that may endanger it, particularly when such information is widely publicized. It could thus sacrifice news objectivity where there is conflict of interest (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). McChesney (2000: 109) identified two main dimensions in the political economy of communication. These are the nature of relationship between media and communication systems on the one hand, and the broader social structure of society on the other. With a particular interest in how economic factors influence politics and social relations, McChesney examined how media communication systems and content reinforce, challenge or influence existing class and social relation. Second, the political economy of communication looks specifically at how ownership support mechanism such as advertising and government policies influence media behaviour and content. This line of inquiry emphasizes structural factors and the labour process in the production, distribution and consumption of communication.

A major flaw of McChesney's explanation is its lack of theory of value given that economic factors are taken for granted. They are entirely separated from politics and social relation, and placed in a subjective relation to those, the same way ownership, support systems and policies are subject while media behaviour

and content are object. Thus value is sidelined while politics, social structure, social relations, and economic factors are separated, only to be placed in apparently arbitrary transitive relationships with each other. The need for a comprehensive theory of value at the foundation of the political economies of communication is underlined by the claim of most political economists of communication that the primary goal of the discipline is to comprehend and ameliorate social inequalities created by communication practices. Where communication is concerned, the evaluative dimension extends far beyond the purely economic, which is to say the pecuniary dimension of value, or more commonly, money (Graham, 2001). The exercise of power and the production of values are inextricable, and power is merely one form of value translated into another (Graham, 2002). This is quite overt where money values are concerned. Wealth clearly translates into political and social power. But where less quantifiable aspects of value are concerned, for example, moral, cognitive, aesthetic, ethnic, cultural, and technical values, the task of political economies of communication is oriented towards making these values explicit in their full connection with political economy. This informs the argument of Mansell (2004: 97) that “a revitalization of the political economy of media and communication is required in order to achieve a more holistic account of the dynamics of new production and consumption.”

Pertinent to newspaper ownership in Nigeria is the use of newspapers as a propaganda tool through the manipulation of significant symbols of the body, particularly the mind and emotion, obviously to secure support either for the cause propagated by the proprietors or their persons. The covert public persuasion method employed by newspapers resulting in discreet imposition of their ideology and position enable them to project those values or viewpoint that the owners cherish or find useful for attaining their goals while still giving the impression that they are popular outlets for the dissemination of seemingly harmless news and commentaries. But contrary to the position of McChesney (2000), that newspaper ownership mostly serves political ends in Nigeria, as in any other parts of the world, the funding of the newspapers even when they find it hard to break-even connotes the existence of more important, hidden motives for their establishment. Rather, as Graham (2002) argued, the funding of newspapers in many cases moves beyond the purely economic benefits accruing to proprietors, and which mostly are not actually forthcoming, to the exercise of power and influence.

One can see in the use to which the *West African Pilot* (WAP) established in 1937 and *Nigerian Tribune* (NT) founded in 1949, were put in the 1950s and the late 1970s, respectively, and mirrored in the use to which other contemporary private newspapers were put. The potency of newspapers and their manipulation to serve a particular end notwithstanding, the influence of proprietors on journalists working in their newspaper organizations could be assessed from two major perspectives. First, journalists irrespective of the newspaper’s ideology or editorial policy are sometimes allowed to express their opinions in their columns, viewpoints or general features which overtime became recognized as the official position of the newspapers. This was the case with the *Ayekooto* Column in the *Daily Service* and *Daily Express* between 1954 and 1962 and later in the *NT* in the 1960s and 1970s, and *Uncle Bola* Column in the 1980s and beyond.<sup>(2)</sup>

Secondly, owner censorship could sometimes burden the journalists who refuse to comply, as they are often dismissed or allowed to resign. Resisting the overt control of a newspaper by the owner, seen in the President Ibrahim Babangida's control of the *New Nigerian* (*NN*) in the 1990s, or the proprietor's desire not to offend the government in power could cost dearly. This was the case with Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the founder of the *Concord* Group of Newspapers, and Bayo Onanuga among others in the 1990s, later discussed in the paper.

On the other hand, similarity in or acceptance of the political ideology/disposition of the proprietors could endear journalists to them, as seen in the relationships between, for example, Chief Ayo Ojewumi, Alhaji Lateef Jakande and Chief Olabisi Onabanjo among others with Chief Obafemi Awolowo (Emiola, 1999: 146–150; Suberu, 1989: 59–78), or between Doyin Aboaba (later Doyin Abiola) and the late Dele Giwa, and Chief M.K.O. Abiola (Agbaje, 1990: 205–226). Beyond being editors, columnists and journalists with the *NT* and the *Concord* respectively at different times, the personalities in the former group were also political followers of Chief Awolowo while those in the latter group related closely with Chief Abiola. Disagreement with a newspaper's positions could alienate the journalist, as seen in the career of Alhaji Babatunde Jose who left the *Daily Service* owned by the Nigerian Youth Movement as a reporter, because he was uncomfortable with the anti-Zik editorial stance of the newspaper (Jose, 1987: 19).<sup>(3)</sup> While the ability of newspaper owners to exercise control is not in doubt, such controls are not always overwhelming. And where it appears overwhelming or dominant, it is usually after the journalists would have exercised the commonly available opportunity of access to express their opinions whether it is considered pleasant and acceptable or rejected outright.

## DEFINING AND CATEGORIZING NEWSPAPER OWNERSHIP IN NIGERIA

Newspaper ownership in Nigeria range from individuals, groups to governments. The pioneering efforts of the European missionaries laid the foundation for the growth of a flourishing and vibrant press in Nigeria. Rev. Hope Waddell, a missionary of the Church of Scotland, set up a printing press that concentrated on printing religious materials in Calabar in 1846. Rev. Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society based in Abeokuta published the first newspaper known as *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* in 1859 (Duyile, 1987: 1–6, 14–18; Oduntan, 2005: 298). Although it was more of a Christian newsreel when compared to a modern conception of a newspaper, it nonetheless performed a newspaper's traditional function of informing and educating (Oduntan, 2005: 299–301). Individuals' involvement spanned both colonial and postcolonial periods (Omu, 1978: 19–69; Duyile, 1987: 87–129, 362–469).<sup>(4)</sup> Of particular interest are those newspapers whose ownership could not be accurately determined.

Private newspaper ownership, as with government ownership, requires extensive capital outlay, ability to manage men and resources, and a strong commitment to the promotion of an acceptable standard in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. The readiness to provide for these requirements determines the survival,



growth and longevity or otherwise of newspapers. But unlike government newspapers whose functionality and direction depend on the type of government managing them, or more precisely the type of elite in that government, private newspapers depend entirely on the ingenuity of the founders, his successors or the team he is able to assemble. Interestingly, except for regionally or state-owned newspapers whose threat to existence could be the powerful central government, private newspapers faced the greatest challenge in terms of sourcing materials and equipments for successful operation and retaining high quality staff. Group-operated newspapers are mostly privately owned. Perhaps there is more than one dominant individual or family who mostly see themselves as the co-founder, despite that each person in the group has assigned roles and responsibility at least for the convenience of administering the newspaper.

Despite the impression often given that government newspapers are in the public domain to serve public interest, they mostly serve the interest of the government elite who often use them to project and defend their persons and promote their policies in government no matter how unpopular. Whereas a private newspaper owner strives to break even against the odds, most government owned newspapers draw on regular and ample subvention from government, even when the output in terms of quality of news, depth of analysis and extent of coverage do not meet a standard. In some cases, government newspapers are established in response to the existence of a newspaper in a neighbouring state or the old state from where the new was carved, or still the need to counter the provocative posture or the intransigence of private newspapers. The inability of some state newspapers to publish regularly or the printing of some outside their state or worse still the inability to attract and retain good hands and consequently their poor quality could not be divorced from the desperation to have state newspapers.

Apologists of public interest theory have argued that government ownership of the mass media is desirable for some reasons. One is that information is a public good. Secondly, although the marginal cost is relatively low, the cost of providing and disseminating information is fixed. Lastly, where the consumers are ignorant, private newspapers can be servile and thus can manipulate information. Thus, to maximize citizens' welfare, active participation of the state in mass media ownership is desirable (Djankov et al., 2003). But these are not enough justification for the existence of government newspapers or its preferment to private ones.

Cutting across private and government newspapers are traditional and activist newspapers. Traditional newspapers are contented with normal reportage of news and sometimes analysis, and mostly refrain from being committed to or taking any position in controversial public matters and do not seek to challenge the government. The opposite is the situation with an activist press. These categorizations notwithstanding, the impact of globalization has removed restrictions in global access to information, facilitates speed and ensures the proper linkage to the remotest part of the world. Such facilities, as the internet, satellite and cable television, and global satellite for mobile communication, have not only enhanced information gathering by the different categories of newspapers in Nigeria, they seek to dwarf and outpace them.

## NEWSPAPER OWNERSHIP IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Situated in the context of its development and growth within the Nigerian state, the flourishing of private newspaper ownership despite the government newspapers' dominance had its root in the colonial period. Beyond encouraging their growth, the hostile colonial environment toughened and strengthened private newspapers. Such challenges as withdrawal of patronage through placement of advertisement, and promulgation of draconian rules and regulations guiding the operation of the press only contributed to the vibrancy of the newspapers and distilled the essential features that characterized them in the post colonial period (Omu, 1978: 87–95, 172–195). Thus from the *Anglo-African* (1863–1865), seen by Duyile (1987: 219) as the first radical newspaper because of its critical appraisal of the problems of the period, to the *Lagos Weekly Record (LWR)* founded in 1891 and seen as an anti-establishment newspaper, and later the *WAP* described as the sentinel of democracy (Coker, 1968: 32–34, 39–42), private newspapers developed a resilient spirit that later came to be identified particularly with the guerilla press, described later. Observably, in the colonial period, the government supported and prompted the establishment of some newspapers to promote its viewpoints and counter the vociferous newspapers. The trend continued in the postcolonial period when federal, regional and later state governments established newspapers to counter the seemingly very vocal newspapers and to find accommodation for their positions. The establishment of the *Nigerian Pioneer* in 1914, the encouragement given to the founding of the *Nigerian Daily Times* (later, the *Daily Times*) in 1926 and the establishment of the *Morning Post* in 1961 are pertinent examples (Omu, 1978: 245–246; Duyile, 1987: 113–124).

The repressive nature of the Nigerian State in the postcolonial period, obviously a derivative from the colonial period, ensured the sustenance or perpetuation of the culture of intolerance and hostility towards the vibrant and non-conforming newspapers. The wholesale adoption of the colonial state with its apparatuses made this possible. It also made the vibrant section of the press more vocal and more resistant to all forms of repression, both legal and extra-legal. Whereas this repression was more noticeable under military governments, it was not limited to it, as civilian governments also employed subtle and sometimes open methods to gag or control the press. But the pattern of newspaper ownership was not substantially altered under successive military dictatorships. Rather, the stagnant economy, the resultant low economic empowerment of Nigerians (except for the military apologists), and the limited use to which the newspapers could be put in the absence of open political activities constituted stronger limiting factors on press ownership.

The *Daily Times (DT)* was foremost in group ownership when four men on the platform of the Lagos Chamber of Commerce floated it in 1926 (Namme, 1976: 13–17; Olagunju, 1996: 19–23). Others had since followed the trend particularly with the emergence of *Newswatch* in 1985, *Tell* in 1991 and *The News* in 1993. Government involvement which started after the attainment of political independence in 1960 climaxed in 1975 with the Federal Government take-over of the *DT* and *NN* established in 1966, and deeper state government involvement



in newspaper ownership. The trend had since been reversed with the Federal Government privatization policy which led to the sale of the *DT* and *NN* to Folio Communications Limited in 2004 and the 19 Northern State Governments in 2006 respectively. The *DT* had ceased publication since its sale. Apart from the 19 Northern State Governments, some other states that own newspaper are Delta (*The Pointer*), Rivers (*The Tide*), Kano (*The Triumph*), Kogi (*The Graphics*), Plateau (*The Nigerian Standard*) and Kwara (*The Herald*). The list is by no means exhaustive.

Whether at the individual or government level, ownership is defined or characterized by the ability to exercise control or exert influence in the running of the newspapers having provided resources that facilitated their publication and their continued existence. In most cases, ownership operated at the level of being a publisher except for a few cases such as *This Day Newspaper*, founded in 1995. The publisher, Nduka Obaigbena doubled as the editor-in-chief since its establishment. The weekly news magazines, *Newswatch*, *Tell* and *The News*, had owners who were actively involved as administrators, editors and writers. The level of control exercised by proprietors involves mostly the appointment of editors who could also be removed as was the case at different times in the history of the Nigerian press. From the prevalence of editor-proprietor and editor-printer of the 1900s (Coker, 1968: 2–6), the process of editor recruitment evolved through the stages of apprenticeship, employed notably by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (Azikiwe, 2004: 308–309), Chief Awolowo and even the *DT* in the 1940s. There were appointments of better educated people as editors in the 1970s, and the 1980s saw the assemblage of versatile, highly educated and intelligent individuals in the editorial boards (Okoye, 2003a: 10–17).

For many of the newspapers, acceptance of appointment as an editor or a journalist connoted the subordination of their interest to that of the proprietor who mostly used their newspapers to promote and defend their interests and careers. Attempts at rejecting or seeking freedom from this subordination generated diverse problems. The case of the *NN*, following its take-over by the Federal Government, provides a good example. The writing of an editorial that was critical of the appointment of Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki as the 13<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Sokoto by the General Ibrahim Babangida government in 1987 eventually led to the dismissal of Mohammed Haruna, and a more pliant editor, Mallam Sidi Ali Sirajo was appointed (Olukotun, 2005: 38). Similarly, the exit of Bayo Onanuga, Babafemi Ojudu, Dapo Olorunyomi, Kunle Ajibade and Seye Kehinde from the *African Concord* due to the publisher, Chief Abiola's apology to General Ibrahim Babangida over one of its cover stories are other examples (Olukotun, 2005: 82).

In the other extreme, the writing of editorials or its manipulation by the proprietors, the involvement of editors in partisan politics and/or sympathy to the political cause of their owners are indications of another level of influence wielded by proprietors. The former was the case with the now discontinued *WAP* (Azikiwe, 2004: 308–309) and *NN* that was taken over by the Federal Government (Olukotun, 2002a: 193–211; Olukotun, 2005: 38, 50, 54–55). The latter relates to the *NT*, and some editors saw the dividing line between politics and journalism as being very thin (Babatope, 1999: 156–164).<sup>(5)</sup> Arising from this discourse is the difficulty

in distinguishing between intellectual and entrepreneurial ownership of newspapers because of the sweeping nature of ownership. The only exceptions were such newsmagazines as *Tell* and *The News*. This perhaps explains why these magazines have been the vanguard of press activism since their establishment. A similar magazine, *Newswatch*, typifying the combined ownership and once even championing the cause of press activism, lost its steam due to the assassination of its founding editor-in-chief, Dele Giwa, via a parcel bomb in 1986.

#### NEWSPAPER OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL: BEYOND POLICY, PHILOSOPHY AND RHETORICS

Most newspapers in Nigeria at their inception professed laudable editorial policies and ideologies which often gave the impression that the collective good of the country and the well-beings of its citizens were the primary purposes for their establishment. Ostensibly, these were meant to attract patronage and establish them in a competitive newspaper market characterized by many extraneous considerations such as ethnic politics and suspicions, strong religious and regional affiliations and mutual antagonism among leaders. Contradicting these declared principles and philosophies are the real motives for which the newspapers were established by the proprietors or what they were later used for, an indication of the manifestation of hidden and sometimes open agenda of the proprietors. Three newspapers provide examples. One major justification for the choice of these newspapers was the role they played in the dispensation in which they were founded, particularly their use for the promotion of the political interest of their proprietors.

The discontinued *WAP* had as its motto: “show the light and the people will find the way.” As explained by Nnamdi Azikiwe, its publisher, the duty of a pilot was to guide the ship entrusted to his care. His intention was not to pontificate but to turn the searchlight of publicity in the form of narration, exposition, description or argumentation on the courses of action affecting his country directly or indirectly, and in the process leaving people to decide for themselves what attitude to adopt and what action to take under such guidance (Azikiwe, 2004: 286–289). Specifically, its maiden editorial stressed that:

... the editorial policy of this newspaper will be independent in all things and neutral in nothing which affects the destiny of Africa ...

... we believe that genuine cooperation between the Government and the governed is and must be a *sine qua non* toward the successful realization of the objectives of the state, as an instrument for the crystallization of social and economic security to the nationals and residents under the aegis of that state’s territorial sovereignty. Therefore, we shall not claim to be pro-this or anti-that.

... it will be our supreme task, as a sentinel of popular liberty and guardian of civilization, to make our assertion in non-ambiguous terms (*West African Pilot*, 22 November 1937).

The contributions of the paper to the nationalist struggle could be understood from this perspective.

Beyond the views expressed in the maiden editorial of the newspaper, two major political issues were particularly relevant in the editorial policy enunciated for the Zik group of newspapers of which *WAP* was one. The two issues are:

1. Our newspapers shall promote the cause of national unity and should always emphasize the ties that bind the various linguistic and cultural groups forming our nation. Under no circumstances shall the columns of our newspaper be used to foster extremes of regionalism, provincialism, parochialism and other forms of racial or tribal jingoism.
2. In forming public opinion, our newspapers shall be guided generally by the principles enunciated in the (a) Charter of the Nigerian Youth Movement, 1938, (b) the NCNC (National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons later National Council for Nigerian Citizens) Freedom Charter, 1948 (c) the NCNC Election Manifesto, 1951, and (d) the Manifesto of the Socialist Workers and Farmers Party, 1964 (Azikiwe, 2004: 496).

Arguably, these two issues appear contradictory in the sense that a newspaper seeking to promote the cause of national unity could not at the same time successfully subscribe to the principles enunciated by some political associations, parties or interests to which every Nigerian did not belong. Indeed, by associating with partisan political groups or subscribing to their principles, the commitment of the *WAP* to the cause of national unity hung very much in the balance. More importantly, the actual performance of the newspaper was a far cry from its professed commitment to the cause of national unity. This was particularly the situation beginning from the early 1950s, when the scramble for political offices with its attendant spoils began (Coleman, 1971: 346).<sup>6</sup>

*NT*'s editorial policy was encapsulated in the statement of its founder and first chief executive in 1949. Chief Awolowo in one of the leading articles written in the maiden edition of the paper stated that:

To my mind ... we are sufficiently equipped for the fight ... if we cultivate, keep and develop in the skilful use of these two most potent weapons: a frank tongue and pungent pen, a tongue and pen that will care less of what the opponents might say, how they might feel, and will have enough courage to call hypocrisy, humbug and tyranny their true names. Such tongue, such a pen will mortify the pound and provoke despotism to repent its ways (Awolowo, 1949: 4–5).

Building on this, the *NT* in its second issue gave seven reasons why the newspaper should be read. Conspicuous among the reasons was that the *NT* was set “for a policy of militant but constructive nationalism,” fostered “without discrimination or partiality, the cohesion of every ethnical or linguistic group in the country,” and sedulously promoted “the federal unity of Nigeria” (*Nigerian Tribune*, 17 November 1949).

The editorial policy of the *NT* was comprehensively articulated in 1977. Collectively known as the Five Dimensions of Tribune Editorial Policy, the first dimension emphasized the belief of the *NT* that a newspaper is the greatest force for good or ill in any community. It therefore owes tremendous responsibility to the public, both as a business and a public utility. This responsibility must not be compromised either by special interests, for hope of reward or fear of adverse consequences from any quarter. The responsibility is discharged when a newspaper reports all news of public interest as truthfully and accurately as it can ascertain, and publishes faithfully comments and opinions expressed by the public. It is therefore the duty of a newspaper to guide, educate and entertain the public (Olamiti, 1999: vi–viii).

The second dimension saw the *NT* as an independent newspaper that is absolutely committed to publishing every report of public interest, subject only to the constraint imposed by law. It therefore promised to place the health of the nation over and above injury to individual or group feelings. In the third dimension, the *NT* promised to publish both pleasant and unpleasant news regardless of the personalities involved, as acting contrary would amount to a disservice to the general public and the government concerned. The fourth dimension stressed the *NT*'s belief in democracy, supremacy of the will of the people as freely expressed, an economy organized on sound economic principles, highest possible standard of public morality, a truly federal system of government, the rule of law and social justice. The fifth dimension stressed the resolve of the *NT* to remain constructive, balanced and courageous in its analysis of events and comments, as a way of justifying the inspiring confidence of the Nigerian public and the valued respect of those in authority (Olamiti, 1999: vi–viii).

Given that the *NT* along with other nationalist newspapers was at the forefront of the nationalist struggle, condemning where and when necessary the colonial government programmes and policies, and providing a very important outlet for the expression of nationalist feelings and views, its intention to be a potent weapon in the hands of the nationalists to propagate the cause of freedom could be justified. Its roles during the period of constitutional development particularly beginning from 1951 were testimonials to this. But the *NT* was established primarily to champion the cause of the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, a Yoruba socio-cultural association, and the Action Group (A.G.) it founded, and its promise to promote sedulously the federal unity of Nigeria appears contradictory. Similarly, the *NT*'s resolve to give truthful and accurate reports, remain independent and be constructive were at different times compromised. This was particularly the case in the early 1950s with the press war that raged between the *NT* and the *WAP*.<sup>(7)</sup> The inability of the newspaper to be independent of its founder and his idiosyncrasies facilitated its use as a platform for political propaganda and personal aggrandisement.

The now discontinued *National Concord* founded by Chief Abiola was first published in 1980 with a mission to revitalize and amplify the voice of public opinion in Nigeria (*National Concord*, 1 March 1980). The *Concord* idea, according to the publisher was founded on the need for harmony, justice and progress for all Nigerians. It was therefore seen as a venture of hope, inspiration and progress,

with an emphasis on the courage to say and do what it believed in without fear or favour. The declared intention of the paper was to devote its energy and attention to its espoused ideals of harmony, unity, peace, friendship, understanding and cooperation in Nigeria in order to build a virile and progressive country. In doing this, the paper resolved to remain scrupulously faithful to the ethics of the noble profession of journalism. Stressing further the importance of national harmony particularly in the light of the chequered history of Nigeria, it maintained that:

National harmony is one thing that has sadly eluded Nigeria since she attained political independence on October 1, 1960. Before then, the several constitutional conferences in London and here at home had given the signal to the political confusion which was later to follow after independence (*National Concord*, 1 March 1980).

Beyond identifying the manifestation of the problem of disunity such as tribalism factional politics or extreme parochialism, the paper stressed that the same “cankercorns” (set of destructive issues) have been responsible for the inability of successive leaders to live above primordial attachments. Therefore the desire of the *Concord* group of newspapers was to assist in every way possible, efforts to rid Nigeria of the evils associated with disunity. The newspaper’s resolve was to fight to certain defeat, any attempt to worsen the situation or prevent progress towards a solution. It observed further that politics in Nigeria has always been dirty because of the failure of a few leaders to subjugate their personal interests to the overall interests of the nation as a whole. The causes of the successive tragedies that have befallen this country are blamed on the giant size ambition of these leaders to rule the country. Apparently referring to the crisis within the A.G. in the First Republic, the *Concord* blamed the non-resolution of the intra-party crisis for the imposition of a state of emergency in the Western region and the subsequent military intervention.

Whereas the establishment of such vernacular weeklies as *Amana*, *Isokan* and *Udoka* within the *Concord* group seemed like an effort to achieve this concord, it eventually turned out to be a strategy by the publisher to reach down to the grassroots preparatory to his serious involvement in partisan politics. Interestingly and until the publisher had problem with the leadership of the proscribed National Party of Nigeria in the Second Republic, the paper was used to promote and champion the cause of the party and the government it formed at the federal level (Agbaje, 1990: 211–213). This same development brought the newspaper into conflict with the military government of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. The annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential election results, allegedly won by its publisher climaxed the conflict, and prepared the ground for the demise of the newspaper, first with its closure in 1994 and its final disappearance in 2000 after some months of epileptic appearance (Olukotun, 2005: 64–65).

For government-owned newspapers including the *DT* and *NN*, the story was not different. The *DT* before its take-over had as its objectives and policies the intention to be a national newspaper attached to no particular creed or party, just as its

contemporary, the *London Times*. In addition, the newspaper maintained that:

... whatever makes for the healthy progress and advancement of Nigeria will have our hearty support and one of our chief aims will be to develop in all Nigerians, white or black, a strong sense of sane nationalism and a desire to work with hearty cooperation and singleness of purpose to bring this young promising country to its proper place in the imperial brotherhood .... Except occasionally and in particular grave matters, we shall perhaps for several years to come maintain a detached attitude towards local politics which have never up to now risen above petty personal squabbles .... The bigger problems which affect Nigeria as a whole will be our immediate concern and these will provide for a long time to come, enough outlets for our energies (*Nigerian Daily Times*, 1 June 1926).

Further exposition of its editorial policy made in 1963 re-affirmed the national character of the newspaper as well as its independence. In particular, the *DT* professed to be politically independent and promised to oppose bad political policies or actions. It also promised to give broad general support to the Government in power while at the same time reserving the right to criticize government policies considered antagonistic to the country's best interest. In doing this however, the newspaper promised to be fair, constructive, impersonal and unbiased (Namme, 1976: 26–28; Olagunju, 1996: 25–28). However, with the compulsory acquisition of sixty percent controlling shares in the newspaper in 1975, it became the mouthpiece of and a potent instrument in the hands of the elite in government. In particular, the elite that dominated the political landscape between 1979 and 1983 used the newspaper to feather their political nest.

Before its take-over by the Federal Government in 1975, the *NN* was one newspaper that did not mince words or pretend about the purpose it wanted to serve: to identify with the old Northern region of Nigeria and its peoples. Its editorial maintained that:

As a Northern newspaper, we shall seek to identify ourselves with the North and its peoples, their interests and aspirations. For that, we offer no apology. But at the same time, we shall champion the vital need for national unity, for without unity and the trust and mutual respect that goes (sic) with it, this great country will never find its rightful place in the sun (*New Nigerian*, 1 January 1966).

The newspaper also promised to oppose tribalism and all forms of racialism and discrimination, honour truth and welcome all shades of responsible opinion because of its consciousness that it represented the people as a whole and not just a section of it. More importantly, it promised to fight by the principles which it professed and if necessary fall, “if truth and justice are assailed by ignorance and fear or tolerance challenged by prejudice” (*New Nigerian*, 1 January 1966). Given this apparent contradiction, it turned out in the course of its history that where the national interest conflicted with its regional aspirations the newspaper mostly



chose to support and promote regional interest. With its take-over in 1975, the newspaper added to its burden the responsibility of promoting and protecting the interest of the elite in power while also serving as their mouthpiece, a task it performs with greater vigour when those elite are from the North.

For the overtly non-political newspapers including the *Punch*, *Guardian*, *Vanguard*, established in 1976, 1983 and 1984 respectively, their adherence to their professed principles and philosophy have shown that to a very large extent newspapers could keep to their policies and principles if they do not live in the shadows of their proprietor. The *Guardian*, with its motto, "Conscience, Nurtured by Truth," has relatively lived up to the basic principles and philosophy that it articulated for itself. Established for the purpose of presenting balanced coverage of events, and of promoting the best interests of Nigeria, it did not apparently owe allegiance to any political party, ethnic community, religious or other interest group. Its professed primary commitment was to the integrity and sovereignty of the Federation of Nigeria, and beyond to the unity and sovereignty of Africa (Olukotun & Seteolu, 2001: 30–34; Agbese, 2006: 49). This was despite the Ibru family's peculiar ways of playing politics ostensibly to safeguard their business interests (Agbaje, 1990: 220). Not even the appointment of its publisher, Alex Ibru as a minister would affect the outlook of the newspaper which remained so independent of the publisher and so critical of the regime of General Abacha. But the newspaper and its publisher eventually paid heavily for this (Ndaeyo, 2004: 27). Similarly, the *Vanguard's* resolve with its motto, "Towards a better life for the People," was to offer the best platform for serious discourse on national issues. Its wish was to be fair, balanced and decent. It also purposed not only to be a leader in political reporting and informed commentary but also to give comprehensive coverage to business and economy that would serve as ready reference points to stakeholders in national economic life (Duyile, 1987: 444–445). Although the *Punch* became more politically inclined in its reportage and coverage in the course of its history, it started as an apolitical newspaper (Agbaje, 1990: 211–212).

#### *WAP*, *NT*, AND PARTISAN POLITICS

*WAP* and the *NT* provide classic examples of how newspapers were maintained to serve partisan political interests beginning from the 1950s following the introduction of the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 and continuing until the late 1970s. Beginning with the emergence of the A.G., the *NT* was effectively used to make the party known. The objectives of the party were extensively publicized (*Nigerian Tribune*, 21 March 1951, p. 1). More importantly, the *NT* publicized its strong belief that the A.G. in the light of its highly organized structure will be victorious in elections. It maintained that:

... we of this newspaper take a good measured pride in the fact that as far back as March 1950, ... an organization embracing all the nationalists of the Western Region has been working quietly but resolutely and without osten-

tation, succeeded in evolving definite plans and programmes for contesting the coming elections and for coping with circumstances of the new constitution and in the centre (*Nigerian Tribune*, 22 March 1951, p. 2).

Beyond identifying with the party, the *NT* sought to market it to other regions. This as argued by the *NT* was because action was the greatest ingredient needed in Nigerian politics of the period (*Nigerian Tribune*, 31 March 1957, p. 2). Although the above editorial may read as advisory, it amounted to prompting the A.G. to spread its tentacle outside the Western Region.

Perhaps in response to mounting criticisms about its emergence as a regional party, the A.G. through the *NT* tried to explain why it began as an ethnic-based party, contending that, "it is no sin for any organization to start anywhere and with any personnel," stressing that "there must be a starting point for everything" (*Nigerian Tribune*, 30 March 1951, p. 2). Similarly, the megaphone role of the *NT* continued with the serialization of the A.G. policy papers as well as strong editorials on its philosophy (*Nigerian Tribune*, 5 May 1951, p. 2). While lauding the A.G. for not soliciting financial support, the *NT* criticized the NCNC (National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons (later National Council for Nigerian Citizens)) for doing so through the *WAP* (*Nigerian Tribune*, 7 May 1951, p. 2). Furthermore, while portraying the A.G. as a group with a future, the *NT* denigrated an unspecified organization, apparently the NCNC, for dashing the people's hope at a time it was most needed (*Nigerian Tribune*, 15 May 1951, p. 2).

Beyond serving as the mouthpiece of the A.G., the *NT* also mounted serious propaganda against opposition parties. These propaganda ranged from countering the report of other newspapers, particularly the *WAP*, on the coverage of political party meetings (*Nigerian Tribune*, 10 May 1951, p. 1), threatening opposition parties and discouraging them from holding political meetings (*Nigerian Tribune*, 15 May 1951, p. 1), correcting supposedly erroneous reports by others. For example, the *WAP* edition of 14 May 1951 alleged that Chief Awolowo referred to the Igbo as *Kobokobo*, meaning barbarians. To counter this supposedly erroneous report, Chief Awolowo attacked Dr. Azikiwe, that he "detest his political methods which...are fraudulent, crude and diabolical" (*Nigerian Tribune*, 16 May 1951, p. 1). Indeed the *NT* went a step ahead to create a new column titled, "Ye shall know the Truth," apparently to ensure the monitoring of the *WAP* and the continuity of the *NT* attack on it (*Nigerian Tribune*, 21 May 1951, p. 2).

But the propaganda war waged on Dr. Azikiwe and the NCNC sometimes responded to similar propaganda mounted by the *WAP*, a clear case of tit for tat. For instance, in apparent retort to the opinion expressed by the *NT* following a debate on whether Dr. Azikiwe should retire from politics or not, the *WAP* condemned those it referred to as daft critics who were misguided by their irrational sense of criticism and who had piled much rubbish over the isolated statement made at the debate. The *WAP* therefore contended that it found it difficult "to furnish the particulars of any known rival political figure that has attained the height which Zik reached and kept" (*West African Pilot*, 11 January 1951, p. 2).

Related to the issue of propaganda was the use of the newspapers to criticize,

albeit destructively, opposing political parties, their leaders and founders. The *WAP* took the lead in this regard. Apparently seeing the A.G. as a potential rival in the contest for the Western Region, the *WAP* did not spare a word in denigrating the A.G. and its leadership. It saw the A.G. as a camouflaging party using the long term unification of the West to deceive unsuspecting people. It contended further that its only aim was to form a platform from which seats in the new legislative council could be captured (*West African Pilot*, 20 April 1951, p. 2). While it saw the A.G. as a power-seeking organization, it maintained that no unscrupulous manouvre would reverse the clock. The *WAP* concluded that it detested the dissipation of energy when political organizations mushroomed (*West African Pilot*, 20 April 1951, p. 2). Apparently the mushroom political organization referred to included none other than the A.G.

Not surprisingly, the *NT* fought back by attacking not only the NCNC but also its leaders. For example, the NCNC was labelled as “the vandals of Nigerians politics” and referred to in a title as “Nigerian Cheating Nigerians and the Cameroons” (*Nigerian Tribune*, 26 May 1951, p. 2). The manifesto of the NCNC was also sharply criticized as:

documentary nonsense which touches very little and certainly in no specific manner, on the urgent needs of this country and which on the whole, betrays not only the lack of intelligence but also the incompetence of the leaders of the NCNC to control the affairs of this country (*Nigerian Tribune*, 1 June 1951, p. 2).

The same trend continued in the countdown to the 1979 general elections. Dr. Azikiwe expressed his views that no tribalist could rule, in apparent reference to Chief Awolowo (*Daily Sketch*, 31 May 1979, p. 2). In response, Dr. Azikiwe was described as unfit to rule by the elementary logic that if no tribalist could rule, then Dr. Azikiwe was a tribalist who could not rule and should therefore be rejected by the electorates. As if calling a dog a bad name with the intent of hanging it, Dr. Azikiwe’s antecedents as the Editor of the *WAP* and the various anti-Western Region stances that he took were highlighted. More importantly, his efforts to enhance anything Igbo using the *WAP* was cited as an example (Adegoke, 1979: 3). Most unfortunately for Dr. Azikiwe, the *WAP* was already moribund during this period, and there was no effective mouthpiece and medium of expression to propagate his cause and fight back.

The *NT* was also used to project the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) founded in 1978 and led by Chief Awolowo (Olawoyin, 1979: 13; Dada, 1979: 3). At the same time, issues that were considered inimical to Chief Awolowo’s interest were promptly attacked. This was the situation with the statement made by General Olusegun Obasanjo that “the best man or the best team is not necessarily that which the electorate chooses to run the government over a particular period.” Even when no name was mentioned, the *NT* perhaps considered this as a rejection of the candidature of Chief Awolowo (*Nigerian Tribune*, 9 July 1979, p. 3).

Evident in this discourse is the tremendous influence of proprietors in shaping the course and direction of newspaper, an indication of why despite its daunting

challenges, many have become newspapers proprietors. Beyond proving the dynamic nature of ownership, it also shows that there are perhaps some alluring benefits of newspaper ownership in Nigeria.

#### OWNERSHIP AND NEWSPAPER FORTUNE IN A CHANGING POLITY AFTER 1999

The advent of democratic rule in 1999 saw the proliferation of newspapers, some with a relatively national spread. Among them are *Daily Independent* (2001), *The Sun* (2003), *The Daily Trust* (2003), *The Nation* (2006), *Nigerian Compass* (2008) and *Westerner* (2008). Specifically between 2000 and 2005, it was reported that the number of daily newspapers increased from 16 to 20 while that of weeklies shrank from 28 to 23 (African Media Development Initiative, 2006). The increase in the number of dailies obviously included some of the surviving old titles: the *NT* as the oldest surviving privately owned newspaper and the *NN* owned by the 19 Northern State Governments. Unlike the previous hostile and suffocating environment of the military era under which the press operated, the relative liberality that characterized the Fourth Republic could have encouraged this proliferation. Whereas the reliance on subscriptions and advertisements which usually were not forthcoming coupled with poor sales returns contributed to the unprofitability of Nigerian newspapers, the deliberate investment in the sector contributed to its survival and sustenance and aided its proliferation.

Arguably, the tradition of the use of the media as a political tool that started during the colonial period continued in the new dispensation with greater vigour. The conviction of some wealthy politicians that newspaper ownership is a way of promoting their political agenda explains the greater investment in it. This explains why such newspapers are not run as pure business ventures but are rather sustained through the continued funding of the politician owners. It also explains why such newspapers could be abandoned once the agenda that necessitated their establishment was realized, or even sometimes when not realized (Africa Media Development Initiative, 2006). For those that are not overtly partisan, their sympathy for different political interests and the attendant patronage have also contributed to their sustenance in addition to the fact that newspapers now are more profitable than they were up to the 1990s. Observably also, individual owners such as Chief Gbenga Daniel, Ogun State governor from 2003 to 2011 now exercises control on one daily, *The Nigerian Compass* and one weekly, *The Westerner* (Abati, 2009). As Soeze (2008) pointed out, publishing is a capital intensive venture given the high cost of newsprint and other materials, the huge financial requirements and the stringent legal requirements. When this cost is placed in the context of insufficient revenue from advertising which hitherto was the lot of many newspapers coupled with frequent closure of mostly private media houses by intolerant governments, then it could be understood why only a changed fortune in terms of profitability or political support could have sustained newspaper publication.

For the overtly political newspapers, one major feature that characterizes or defines them is the secrecy surrounding their real ownership. Included in this

category are *The Sun*, *The Nation* and the *Nigerian Compass*. Despite all attempts at smoke screening by listing fronts as the owners or not giving any information on ownership, their political coverage and sentiments have done much to betray their political leanings. *The Sun*, for instance, believed to be owned by Chief Orji Uzor Kalu in partnership with or as a front for Retired General Ibrahim Babangida though has tried to appear as a national newspaper with its peculiar journalistic style, But its sympathy for the duo is not in doubt. Chief Kalu was the governor of Abia State between 1999 and 2007 and the presidential candidate of the Progressive People's Alliance (PPA) in the 2007 presidential election. General Babangida was the military president of Nigeria between 1985 and 1993 and had been rumoured to show interest in becoming a civilian president at different times between 2004 and now. Significantly, the deliberate silence on matters that concerned the duo negatively including corrupt enrichment and political schemings has fuelled speculations about their interest in the newspaper.

Similarly, *The Nation* believed to have the backing of Chief Bola Ahmed Tinubu has given extensive and positive coverage to the Action Congress, now Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), a political party jointly founded and funded by him and others following the split within the Alliance for Democracy in 2006. Chief Tinubu was a senator in the aborted Third Republic and Lagos State governor between 1999 and 2007. There have been sensational reporting about the activities of the ACN, particularly the coverage of the political campaigns of its aspirants in the 2007 general elections. Among other such reporting, there were the cases of its gubernatorial candidates in the 2007 general elections at election petition tribunals, and its position could be understood and leaning easily known. *The Compass* has given extensive coverage to the activities of Governor Gbenga Daniel of Ogun State, and has been his major instrument to deal with his political enemies. For instance, following the crisis between the Governor and some members of the State House of Assembly, the newspaper published stories and the nude picture of a legislator opposed to Governor Daniel where he was allegedly taking an oath of loyalty to the Governor. The legislator had initially denied knowing anything about the oath.<sup>(8)</sup> Despite its seeming apolitical nature and the front it has put up, the ownership of the *Daily Trust* is still shrouded in secrecy.

For the *NT*, a political phase ended with the death of its founder in 1987, or more appropriately with the demise of the Second Republic in 1983. A new political phase opened in 1999, with the return of civil rule. This phase became progressively manifest as from 2003 when some of its editors were given political appointments. Through a policy rightly described as cooptation (Uche, 1989: 137–139), its editor, Lasisi Olagunju became Special Assistant on Media and, later, Chief Press Secretary and Special Adviser on Media Matters to Governor Olagunsoye Oyinlola of Osun State in 2003. Another editor, Wale Ojo Lanre, became Chief Press Secretary to Governor Segun Oni of Ekiti State in 2009. The impact of these appointments is better seen in the compromised quality of its political reportage and its inconsistency which betrayed the support for progressive politics that it was known for since its founding, its support for the proprietor notwithstanding. Although these editors are not the owners of the *NT*, their influence and network as former employees continue to work for the promotion



and protection of their political masters particularly in the absence of any serious censoring by the publisher who possibly endorsed the development due to the prevailing political climate.

Despite the affiliation and the process of cooptation described above, none of the newspapers have been bold enough to declare publicly their political alignment or allegiance. Apart from being a measure of their development, it also tells much about the elusive nature of ownership and its quality. Beyond the issues of profitability and political use necessitating ownership secrecy, the liberal environment which prevailed since 1999 and which encourage proliferation is significant particularly given what obtained before it. The travails of newspapers and journalists under successive military governments and the losses suffered by proprietors were enough reasons to deter anyone from newspaper ownership.

Beginning with the promulgation of Defamatory and Offensive Publications Decree (No. 44) of 1966 (Ogbonnah, 1994: 44–45; Oloyede, 2004: 44) the press faced terrible persecution in the past. There was the abuse suffered by Minere Amakiri as the Port Harcourt chief correspondent of *The Observer* in March 1974 for publishing a story which purportedly embarrassed Governor Alfred Diète Spiff on his birthday (Abayomi, 2003: 108–109). The promulgation of Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree (No. 11) in 1976 and Nigerian Press Council Decree (No. 31) in 1978 respectively by the General Obasanjo administration was meant to hinder the press from performing its social responsibility role and to subtly weigh the press down as control of its affairs was vested in the hands of other professionals (*Nigerian Tribune*, 10 April, 1976; Okoye, 2003b: 110–111). Interestingly, Dr. Obarogie Ohonbamu, the editor of *African Spark* magazine, was the target of the retroactively passed Decree 11. He was prosecuted and found guilty but warned and discharged (Oloyede, 2004: 117–119).

Similarly, the promulgation of the State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No. 2 and the Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree No. 4 both of 1984 by the Buhari/Idiagbon Regime laid the foundation for the persecution of the citizenry in general and the press in particular. While under Decree No. 2, many Nigerians especially politicians were detained for long periods without trial, it was under Decree No. 4 that two journalists, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor were jailed in 1984 for publishing the list of ambassadorial nominees before it was made public by government (Thompson, 1997: 45–67; Okoye, 2003b: 95; Abayomi, 2003: 113–117). Even when Decree No. 4 was repealed by the Babangida Regime in 1985, the persecution of newspaper houses and journalists persisted, manifesting in arrests and detention of journalists oftentimes without trial, confiscation of newspapers, sealing off of newspapers' houses as well as outright proscription of newspaper titles (Fawole, 1995: 101–104; Olukotun, 2005: 37–56). The assassination of Dele Giwa through a parcel bomb in 1986 and the closure of the *Newswatch* magazine for six months via the *Newswatch* (Proscription and Prohibition from Circulation) Decree 6 of 1987 (Peretei, 2004: 63; *Nigerian Tribune*, 11 April 1987) typified the war waged by the Babangida administration on the press. But for the resistance of the press, the Nigerian Media Council Decree No. 59 of 1988 would have been a perpetual sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of both journalists and publishers



(Adebanwi, 1989). There was also the Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree No. 35 of 1993 which was followed by other obnoxious decrees through which *Tell* and *The News* were proscribed in 1993 (Oloyede, 2004: 68–69).

The same trend continued and became worse under General Abacha. Beyond sealing off media houses and confiscating several editions of some newspapers and magazines, some journalists were tried and jailed on trumped up charges. Similarly, assault on journalists, closure of media houses were common occurrences. There was even the murder of Bagauda Kaltho, a journalist with *The News* and *Tempo* magazines. Worse still was the threat to establish a special court to try erring journalists, an idea fought to a standstill by the Nigerian Press Organization (Kolawole, 1998: 109–114; Momoh, 1998: 17, 26; Abayomi, 2003: 116–117; Okoye, 2003b; Olukotun, 2005: 60–76). Although the military was the most notorious for the persecution of the press given its prolonged rule, the civilian governments were not completely innocent. The enactment of laws which banned the circulation of some newspapers in the Eastern and Western Regions in the 1960s is a case in point (Oloyede, 2004: 44). Thus the use of laws, decrees and the court in addition to cooptation ensured that government maintained its grip on the press. In effect, the reluctance and the vacillation to pass the appropriate legislation to promote press freedom amounted to indirect press censorship or willingness to sustain the *status quo*.

The Freedom of Information (FoI) Bill formulated and first presented to the National Assembly in 1999 was intended to guarantee access to documents and information in the custody of the government or its officials and agencies as a necessary corollary to the guarantee of freedom of expression. It was also aimed at creating mechanisms for the effective exercise of this right and ultimately promoted openness and transparency. Originally conceived in 1993 by three different organizations, the Media Rights Agenda (MRA), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) and the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), the FoI Bill was passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate in August 2004 and November 2006, respectively. President Obasanjo refused assent, from the fear that it would empower the media to probe the activities of those in government, and may allow foreigners access to official information (Anonymous, 2000: 56–63; Olukoya, 2004; Idris, 2006; Martin, 2008). Interestingly, the Bill was neither vetoed nor amended by the president. Since its re-presentation the Bill was only passed in March 2011 by the National Assembly (Ameh, 2010; Obi, 2011; Shaibu, 2011). Even then, the allegedly watered down bill was harmonized and passed by the two chambers of the National Assembly finally on 24 May 2011 and assented to by President Goodluck Jonathan on 28 May 2011 (Ehikioya & Oluwasegun, 2011; Ikuomola, 2011). The seeming vacillation over the FoI Bill further points at deliberate efforts to weaken the hands of newspaper owners and journalists.

Although generally repressive, the various draconian laws could be situated in the context of the peculiar circumstances of the different regimes that promulgated them. These ranged from the desire to stabilize the government and the polity as seen in the Ironsi regime, given the political turbulence that preceded it, to sheer power intoxication of office holders including Alfred Diète Spiff. The desire to forcefully shield their profligacy from public glare in an atmosphere of pervasive

corruption that characterized the Gowon administration could explain the Gowon administration censorship. The apparent desire to restore confidence in governance by the Obasanjo administration following the widespread suspicion of corrupt enrichment, a carry-over from the Gowon administration, was perhaps a major consideration in the promulgation of the 1976 decree. The need to prepare the ground to safeguard the Second Republic, given the envisaged liberality that would characterize it, could not be ruled out of the 1978 legislation under the Obasanjo administration. Similarly the Buhari/Idiagbon regime's high-handed disposition to governance generally and the promulgation of draconian decrees inhibiting the performance of the press could be explained by the need to act stringent as a way of correcting the decadence of the Second Republic, brought about by mismanagement and pervasive corruption. The hidden agenda as well as covert and overt manipulations of the Babangida transition programme by its initiator which the press consistently exposed, informed the promulgation of draconian laws. Interestingly, a significant section of the press accepted their repression and only bemoaned their fate, apart from the activist press which took to guerilla journalism. The activist or radical press typifies a section of the press that holds strong views about issues and are non-conformist to the established order. In most cases, their emergence was influenced by the need to fill an obvious void or out of reaction to prevailing situations or circumstances. The emergence of *Tell*, *The News* and *Tempo* in the 1990s and their radical transformation due to the misuse that characterised the military adventure into politics explains this phenomenon. Guerrilla journalism involves a hit and run styles, with journalists, operating from hideouts, publish opposition against all odds to sustain publication in defiance of the state (Olukotun, 2002b: 317–342; Ibelema, 2003: 163–209). Observably, the categories of journalists involved in this were first and foremost owners who by their acts and conducts, especially their direct involvement, shaped the outlook and orientation of their publications and other journalists employed by them. This contrasted with the publishers who were in effect absentee landlords interested in only the financial and political gains accruing to them, offering apology to the power that be, or closing business to unfavourable situations.

For proprietors that accepted political appointments or positions in governments, it was apparent that they used their newspapers to influence government policies. In situations or instances or circumstances of failure, they used it to speak against unpopular policies of such a government, or in the other extreme resign from such a government. The other alternative was to maintain a detached attitude and outlook to the running of their newspapers often with grave consequences for their person and business interests. The former was the case with Chief Awolowo as a leading figure in General Yakubu Gowon administration between 1966 and 1975. The latter was the experience of Chief Alex Ibru as a Federal Minister under General Abacha. Political differences and perhaps the inability to exert influence on General Gowon as before, using the instrumentality of the *NT* among others led to the exit of Chief Awolowo from the government before it was toppled. Chief Ibru almost paid with his life for not exerting influence on his newspaper to support the Abacha government (Ihonvbere, 1996: 193–225; Ndaeyo, 2002; 2004: 27).

## CONCLUSION

Newspapers are veritable tools in the hands of their owners to promote and defend their political careers, who also enrich themselves where possible. This explains the tremendous interest in newspaper ownership by the government or individuals, and largely accounted for its proliferation. However, there has been secrecy surrounding some ownership. The attrition rate has been high as well. The oldest surviving private newspaper in Nigeria today, the *NT* is only slightly over sixty years old. It will be difficult for newspapers to carve out a niche for themselves or have a focused, robust and ideology-driven political allegiance, when its owners are only interested in the achievement of narrow parochial interests.

A redefinition of ownership is important in the process of strengthening the Nigerian press, such that it could play the role expected of it in a globalised world. Government divestment in ownership is commendable in this regard. However, the decision of some states to hold on to their newspapers, and the renewed interest in newspaper ownership, particularly by the political class, is an indication of the growing influence of newspapers despite the emergence of new media in the last twenty years. It is also an indication of the continued attractiveness of newspapers despite their travails and the risk involved in their ownership. What perhaps should be probed into is why newspaper owners will want to hide their identity while reaping the benefits associated with ownership. Ownership is central to a newspaper's health. Becoming or remaining a proprietor requires much more than being wealthy or having some political clout. Newspaper ownership requires a strong political will, transparency, tolerance, relative objectivity and consistency.

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## NOTES

- (1) This trend continued after 1937 and since remained a pattern, but the non-availability of accurate and up to date data makes the compilation for subsequent years difficult and unreliable.
- (2) Ayekooto, a Yoruba name for the bird parrot, literally means the world or people hate the truth. The piece was written by Chief Olabisi Onabanjo, while Uncle Bola's Column was written by Chief Bola Ige. Both served as the First Executive Governor of Ogun and Oyo States, respectively, under the platform of the Unity Party of Nigeria founded by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the proprietor of the *NT*.
- (3) The split with the Nigerian Youth Movement and the formation of another political party by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe encouraged the anti-Zik editorial stance by the *Daily Service*.
- (4) It featured such names as Robert Campbell, Richard Beale Blaize, J.B. Benjamin, Owen Emerick Macaulay, John Payne Jackson, George Alfred Williams, James Bright Davies, Kitoyi Ajasa, Ernest Ikoli, Adeoye Deniga, Herbert Macaulay, Duse Mohammed, J.V. Clinton, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, James Olu Aboderin, Chris Okolie, M.K.O. Abiola, Alex Ibru, L.K. Jakande, Sam Amuka-Pemu, and Emmanuel Iwanyanwu. See Omu (1978: 19–69), and Duyile (1987: 87–129, 362–469).

- (5) Interview with Alhaji Lateef Kayode Jakande, 78 years of age, a former editor of the *NT* and a close disciple of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, in Lagos, 15 September 2006.
- (6) In its struggle with the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* and contrary to its professed principle, the *WAP* was the first to observe this fascism: "Henceforth the cry must be one of the battle against *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, its leaders at home and abroad, up hill and down dale in the streets of Nigeria and in the residences of its advocates... It is the enemy of Nigeria; it must be crushed to the earth... There is no going back, until the Fascist Organization of Sir Adeyemo has been dismembered." See Coleman (1971: 346).
- (7) The various editions of the *NT* in the 1950s, early 1960s, and early 1970s are eloquent testimonies to its use for the promotion and defence of partisan political interest.
- (8) *Nigerian Compass* edition of 28 June 2009, "Ogun Lawmakers in Blood Oath."

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