

## **Media Freedom, Political Conflicts and the Nigerian Cultural Dialectics: The American Example**

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### **Introduction**

With the return of democratic practice in Nigeria, media freedom has again become an issue of major concern. This is due largely to the volatile political culture in Nigeria which is as a result of the multicultural status of the Nigeria's polity. Politics have always been about power relations, the power game, and the allocation of economic resources for political gains within a body polity. The political process therefore has always been ridden by conflicts, counter conflicts, ethnic rivalries and deep-rooted animosity between the political players and their support base.

In a nation like Nigeria with over 250 ethnic nationalities, politics is bound to be a "do-or-die affair" as once described by a former Head of State and President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo. Within the context of this scenario, what role do the media play to ensure fair play? The obvious answer arising from the public expectation of the media cannot be devoid of the type of media freedom available for the Nigerian media system.

There is no doubt that the media could shape the thought processes of a nation. This is epitomized in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with the introduction of "policies by the media" to the Nigerian people. The problem, however, is that of whether the media can truly be objective in the face of so many intervening variables and conflicts of interest in their reporting of politically sensitive issues of national interest in a highly multicultural society like Nigeria. One of such intervening variables is the culture of freedom available for media practice. As "watchdog" of the society, it is expected of the media to give out information and news in a way that will make the public generate their own views. In other words, the media must be objective (even if this remains a subject of context), transparent, believable, and credible to play the watchdog role.

Within the Nigerian political system and cultural dialectics, media freedom is entrapped. The entrapment is a function of larger societal challenges which the Nigerian nation has been grappling with. This paper therefore discusses press freedom, which will be interchangeably used with media freedom, within the Nigerian political milieu and cultural polemics. Having identified the various political, cultural and operational challenges the

media face in Nigeria in their quest to have a virile press system that the people can trust; this paper ultimately presents the American model of media freedom as the desirable system that Nigeria could adopt to free herself from the clutches of political highhandedness and cultural considerations that currently hamper a truly free media in Nigeria.

The American example is highlighted here because like Nigeria, America is a multicultural society with similar political structures. In fact, Nigeria copied American type Presidential system of Government. So, if media freedom works in America with similar political and cultural narratives, it should work in Nigeria! This is the position of this paper and its major crux and contribution. The ingredients that define media freedom in America will also be discussed and highlighted as a must if Nigeria will have the desired media system that will support the unique political culture and multicultural status of the nation.

### **Press Freedom: The Underlying Issues**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the better part of this century, media freedom has remained a contentious issue and debate in media circles. Professional journalists, academics of media orientation and even the enlightened citizenry have continued to raise valid arguments for and against the concept of media freedom whenever such issues are broached up. One then wonders why the issue has remained as controversial as ever.

Media freedom could be defined in a variety of ways, emphasizing context, constitutionality and convenience. Without sounding simplistic, however, media freedom is defined as the freedom to source for news and information of whatever nature, from anywhere and at anytime; and the freedom to report such news and information in any form, through any medium to the people in whose name the freedom is being exercised (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Why has this issue remained as controversial whenever it is mentioned? The answers are derivable from the components that make up the issue. Two distinct issues come up anytime there is a debate on the concept of press freedom. These two distinct issues are: freedom to source for information or free access to information and freedom to report information.

For the first part of this controversy, journalists around the world argue that there should be a legislation assisting them to source for information especially in government agencies, parastatals and establishments. The antagonists to any such legislation are of the opinion that media organizations and their personnel should do more than ask for such legislation. They argue that the ability of the journalist to investigate and reveal hidden facts has become the basis for the assessment of the success of the journalist and his media organization. Take the case of the Watergate Scandal that led to the resignation of the former US President, Richard Nixon, as a case in point (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Those who oppose this call for a legislation assisting journalist to have a freer access to information and information sources further argue that the Pulitzer Award (as a case in point) was instituted to reward journalists who excel in investigative journalism as well as in other forms of journalistic excellence. Taking cognizance of this practice, the journalists and

their media organizations, according to those who oppose their call for legislative support, should not expect news and information to be posted on notice boards for them to copy. They should investigate and reveal what is hidden. What they think should be proper is a legislation that will not prohibit public or private officials from disclosing information. The idea of a legislation compelling them to reveal information sounds lazy-like and unprofessional (Ekeanyanwu, 2008). That you identify yourself as a journalist is not good enough reason for everyone to talk to you about the issue or event in question. Your ability to make them talk even when they don't want to talk should be the journalism.

The second contentious issue under the press freedom debate is the freedom of the journalist and his organization to report news/information without intimidation, harassment, fear or favour. The case here is clear. No government in the world stops its press from reporting/publishing news and information, except of course repressive governments which are no longer in vogue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is obtainable in such repressive and undemocratic regimes is a legislation prohibiting the reportage of some government "classified" information or matter. This was the case in Nigeria under Gen. Mohammed Buhari (Rtd.). He promulgated Decree No. 4 of 1984 to prohibit the press from publishing government secrets or criticizing government officials. The arguments here are unanimous. Publishers, professional journalists, media scholars and the enlightened citizenry all agree that government should remove impediments to the freedom of media organizations to publish news and information as long as such news and information are factual, objective and of consequence to the majority of the citizens of the country (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Apart from these two issues discussed above, the controversial/contentious nature of press freedom also arises due to the nature of the society itself. There is no absolute freedom in the society. Where an individual's freedom begins may be where another individual's so-called freedom ends. Therefore the media cannot be left out or isolated from this 'nature' of things. They must operate within the laws governing their societies. Democratic restrictions then become a necessary evil to avoid press irresponsibility and abuse of the public freedom. In a similar argument, a country's mass media cannot ordinarily expect freedom more than that allowed the society in which they operate. Media freedom should ooze out of societal freedoms for it to be practicable and meaningful. Therefore, such general laws like defamation (libel and slanders), copyright and invasion of privacy that are already in existence in most societies, must also apply to journalists and their organizations as members of such a society (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Notwithstanding this author's position on the idea of media freedom, there are clearly obnoxious and unacceptable practices of Governments and its agents that are primary targeted at the media institution to frustrate its efforts at gathering information and distributing the same. Some of these are repressive and barbaric and therefore should be condemned in its entirety in the third world societies were they are rife. However, the ideal press freedom is not totally obtainable as there are always obstructions, inhibitions, harassments and legal constraints in the practice of journalism in almost every country of the world (Ekeanyanwu, 2008). Some of these constraints may be necessary to protect the public from press irresponsibility; others are unnecessary and are there just to obstruct the smooth

functioning of the media system of that country. These unnecessary obstructions pose as threats to the practice of press freedom. Some of these threats, mostly found in African nations still held under repressive regimes, are discussed below:

**Denials or Reduction in the Supply of Newsprint:** A newspaper's power to publish could be curtailed or censored through the outright denial or reduction in the supply of newsprints. Newsprint is used by the press to print/publish their newspapers and newsmagazines. Scarcity of newsprint usually poses as a threat to printing and when media organizations can no longer print the required number of copies of its newspaper per day, supply suffers and readership declines. This in turn affects distribution as the number of people who crave for news and information may not be able to get them as a result of this reduction in supply of newsprints. Newsprint is a major raw material used by media houses in the production of newspapers. Like any other company that uses raw materials for production, whenever such materials are in short supply, the ability of that company to satisfy the demands for its products is negatively affected. This is exactly what happens in the newspaper industry (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Illegal Detention, Harassment and Intimidation:** This is another major means through which the practice of journalism is threatened. In several countries of the world, especially in the Third World, stories abound about how journalists are illegally detained on flimsy charges or no charges at all. Those who are lucky not to be detained are constantly harassed and intimidated to submission to the will of the oppressors. In Nigeria, a journalist was given a compulsory haircut with a broken bottle because he dared report a teachers' strike on the birthday of the State Governor! These harassments and intimidation affect negatively the practice of journalism as most journalists now live in perpetual fear. This negative practice also results in unethical and unprofessional conducts just to satisfy the journalist's oppressors (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Impounding of Copies of Press Publications:** The seizure of copies of press published materials could also obstruct the smooth operation of any press organization. The implications of this are obvious. First, two vital aspects of media work are greatly affected in a negative way. These vital aspects are dissemination and distribution. When copies of newspapers and newsmagazines, for instance, are seized, the media firm publishing then can no longer disseminate the news or information in those editions. Of course, they cannot distribute what they don't have. Again, there is loss of revenue, which was supposed to accrue to them through the sale of the seized copies. Advertisers could also be on their neck if they fail to meet up with their own part of a contractual agreement. In addition, legal tussles that are very expensive could also result from this (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Outright Closure or Threats of Closure of Media Houses:** On flimsy charges, security agencies and their officials, acting on the orders of a repressive government, can easily and illegally occupy the premises of the so-called "offending" media firms in a bid to prevent them from carrying out their day-to-day operations. This is the zenith of the threats to the practice of journalism anywhere in the world. Many negative implications do arise from illegal closures or threats to it. One, most media firms with not-too-strong financial base may not be able to survive long time closures or constant closures. The Concord Newspaper which

championed the cause of “June 12” political crisis in Nigeria is a case in point. The media house was closed down several times by the Abacha regime and when eventually it was reopened for normal operations, the centre could no longer hold and things fell apart. The result today is that the newspaper has officially “closed down” operations (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Another negative implication is the loss of valued customers, subscribers, advertisers and even professional staff. All these will eventually affect revenue and when companies can no longer break even, they have no other reason to remain in business. Such company will surely close down shop. Those firms, which are lucky to survive initial closures, may become too afraid to continue the “crusade” or play the watchdog role because of open or subtle threats of closure of their media establishment. They may join the bandwagon and engage in unprofessional and unethical acts just to remain in business. The right of the public to information and news that are truthful, factual and objective suffers as a result (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Over Taxation by Government:** A repressive government can also obstruct the practice of journalism through over taxation. When government over taxes a media firm whether legally or illegally, that organization will surely find it extremely difficult to break even. Media business is not a money-spinning business in Nigeria and so, whenever a government introduces all kinds of taxes, then it is trying to force the publishers out of business, using such subtle means as taxing. Buying of newsprints, payment of salaries and wages, purchase and maintenance of equipment as well as other production cost will obviously suffer. Like we noted earlier, it will be a matter of time before the firm closes down (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Withdrawal of Operating Licenses/Threats to Withdraw Licences:** The government could also threaten the practice of press freedom through threats to withdraw or actual withdrawal of operating licenses. This type of intimidation and threat is usually obtainable in countries where media houses are required by their governments to register with them so as to be issued operating licenses. This practice is not healthy for the growth of the profession because any one who pays the piper ultimately calls the tune (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Withdrawal of Advertisements and Grants:** This is another major and subtle means of curbing the practice of journalism and the freedom of the press. Governments and multinational companies can through this means, persuade media organizations to do their bidding. They achieve this through threats to withdraw grants (for government-owned media firms) and advertisements (for non-government-owned/profit making media firms). A Media establishment survives mostly on revenue from sale of copies of published materials, grants/subsides from owners and then, adverts, which shores up the profit margin. Withdrawal of these grants/subsides and adverts by government can affect the financial base of the affected media house. For profit-oriented media firms, they have little or no choice at all. They either do the wishes of those pseudo-financiers or face liquidation as a result of poor financial status (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Enactment of Anti-Press Laws:** This type of threat to the practice of press freedom is obtainable in nations pretending to be practicing democracy while in actual practice the

leadership is autocratic and corrupt. To inhibit the practice of journalism and cover up their corrupt and autocratic practices, they result to enacting anti-media laws so as to give their actions against the press a human face and legal backing. These anti-media laws are found mostly in countries of the Third World where the press is an appendage of government. Nobody is against the media being subjected to the already existing general laws governing society. But to hide under legality to perpetrate illegality through the promulgation of anti-press and anti-people laws is obviously unacceptable. These anti-press laws differ from nation to nation. In Nigeria, the obnoxious Degree No. 4 of 1984 was a case in point (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Pressures from Families and Employers:** Journalists also face undue pressures from friends, relatives and employers. Since the profession of journalism is not too rewarding financially, friends and family members could put pressure on the journalist to accept financial gratification (popularly referred to as “Brown Envelops” in media parlance) so that he can live a more comfortable life with his relatives and friends. If the journalist succumbs to such pressures, then he is obliged to do the wishes of whoever gave him the “gratification” or “Brown Envelop” (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

Friends and relatives could also pressurize the journalists, not just to accept brown envelopes, but to do the bidding of their personal friends and relatives. A wife of a journalist, for instance, could put pressure on her husband (through whatever means she deems necessary) not to expose the dirty deals of her father (the journalist’s father-in-law) who is a government official. These examples are not hypothetical, they do happen. Unfortunately, when they do happen the public’s right to know suffers as a result.

Employers of journalists could also pressure their employees to carry out their egoistic wishes and protect their interests. In this era of massive unemployment, every journalist will always do anything within his abilities to keep his job when he is not too sure of another one. So, whenever pressures or threats to his job arise, he does all within his human abilities and considers all the consequences associated with unemployment before taking his decisions. His final decision could be predicted. He will obviously want to keep his job. In the end, professionalism, ethics, and morality are sacrificed and the public’s right to know the truth also suffers. Press freedom then becomes a matter of academic discussion (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

**Unwarranted Government Secrecy:** Most government agencies and officials also use this method to obstruct the job of journalists and the practice of press freedom. Government is the greatest source of news because its actions or inactions are of consequence to a great number of people. Therefore, whenever it carries out its activities in utmost secrecy, the journalist will be left with little or no news to report. And the newspaper firms and broadcast stations must have enough news and information before the public patronizes them. When the public feels there is nothing worth reading in the newspapers or news magazines, they don’t buy. If the public does not patronize these firms, they fold up. This way, the practice of journalism and press freedom particularly suffers a serious setback (Ekeanyanwu, 2008).

## **Media Freedom/Reportage, Political Conflicts and the Nigeria's Cultural Dialectics**

The term politics originated from the Greek word 'polis', which refers to the political community and the political debates on matters of public interest. As earlier canvassed by this author, politics have always been about power relations, the power game, and the allocation of economic resources for political gains within a body polity. This is further validated by David Easton (1971) cited in Ayam (2004) who argues that politics is the "authoritative allocation of values for society". Ayam (2004) further explains that "the reality of politics which Eastonian definition of politics portends is that there is conflict in society over values by individuals and groups; conflicts which emerge out of difference in regional, ethnic, religious, cultural and lingual outlooks. Although conflicts and differences are important and necessary conditions of politics, they are not sufficient conditions. There must be sufficient order and consensus within the society for those differences and conflicts to be meaningfully resolved so that they do not degenerate into chaos and war".

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, had in historic times described man as "a political animal". This obviously includes reporters who have political emotions that taint their political reports. This could also be very dangerous and delicate in a growing democracy of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, mono-economic, and multifaceted (complicated) nation like Nigeria. Therefore, political conflict reporting should not be in the hands of the cub, inexperienced, unchallenged, and unprofessional reporter. The major argument for this position is that politics should strive to build a stable nation, not a nation of instability (Ekeanyanwu, 2005; 2007).

Considering the fact that conflict is a natural outcome of political negotiations and the power game, as well as the bread and butter of journalism, it is surprising that so little resources and training are dedicated to giving journalists the skills and understanding they need to do this job properly. The case is even worse in Nigeria with the diversities already highlighted above.

The roots of conflict are complex. They emerge from different traditions of upbringing, ethnicity, language, religion, cultural exposure and political ideology. Journalists are therefore not immune from the vestiges of conflict, but they have a unifying strength in the professional work that they suppose to do. They also have a rare capacity — the ability to talk to each other — which provides a basis for problem-solving and solidarity. Therefore, the political reporter is supposed to play a middle man role between the major players in the political field or conflict situation. Media professionals should in fact act as "go-between" between the political class and the entire society in their political coverage and reporting (Ekeanyanwu, 2005).

At this juncture it is important to briefly reconsider the historical perspective of political conflict in the Nigerian context so as to plug into some of the complexities surrounding the media handling of it.

Historical evidence reveals that political conflicts in Nigeria have always been deep rooted in the Nigerian political landscape since the infamous amalgamation of 1914. The

negotiations leading to that unfortunate event in history and the post-amalgamation attempt at nationhood were ridden with conflicts, accusations and counter accusations which were subtly encouraged by the colonial administrators for selfish reasons. Britain, for whatever reason(s) encouraged the policy of “divide-and-rule” in her colonies of that time. The manifestation of political conflicts was clearly seen in the politics of that era but for maturity of the key players and the search for nationhood, it did not turn violent. However, by 1941 when Sir Kofu Abayomi resigned his seat in the Legislative Council after being appointed into the Central Executive Council, matters got out of hand.

The rivalry centred on who was more qualified and best suited to replace the legislator and represent Lagos and the NYM, which Sir Abayomi belonged. Two top contenders emerged in the contest: Ernest Ikoli (an Ijaw man) and Samuel Akinsanya (an Ijebu Yoruba). Although the NYM was predominantly Yoruba in origin, yet, Akinsanya did not originally get the support of the majority of the Yoruba members of the party. According to Coleman, as cited in Olaniyi (2004), perhaps many Yoruba were prejudiced against the Ijebu Yoruba because they controlled the main trade routes into the interior and because they supplied “most of the middlemen in the slave traffic”. All these were some of the conspiracy theories why Ernest Ikoli defeated a Yoruba man in a typical Yoruba dominated constituency.

However, shortly after the defeat of Akinsanya by Ikoli, the Yoruba members in the party led by the iconic and mercurial Chief Obafemi Awolowo changed their position on the election and attempted to replace Ikoli. This led to a major disagreement, which later degenerated, into inter-tribal conflict between the Eastern and Western members of the party. Matters actually got out of hand when the majority of the Eastern members of the NYM led by the influential Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, withdrew their membership of the party and immediately formed the “National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon” which later became “National Council of Nigerian Citizens” when the part of Cameroun that was administered as part of Nigeria voted in a referendum to join the other part of Cameroun as independent nation. The remnants of the Yoruba extraction in the party had no other option than to allow the ghost of NYM to disappear after its natural death. The Yorubas later formed a new party: “Egbe Omo Oduduwa” which was led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. This party became a Pan-Yoruba Socio-Cultural Association and later metamorphosed into Action group (A.G.) in 1951.

The Ikoli-Akinsanya political crisis highlighted and in fact, heightened the role ethnicity and on the larger scale, culture plays in the Nigerian political scene. Consequent upon the outcome of that crisis, every major tribal grouping in Nigeria saw the need to have “our son” at the helms of affairs, his competence notwithstanding. For instance, the popular slogan in the Southwestern part of the country in the second republic was “Omo wa ni e je o se” – He is our son, give him the mandate. The foregoing explains why Coleman wrote that: the Akinsanya crisis was the first major manifestation of tribal tension that affected all subsequent efforts to achieve unity (Olaniyi, 2004:47).

Olaniyi (2004) argues that this historical antecedent influenced the Federal Military Government under General Yakubu Gowon (Rtd) to ensure equitable distribution of political power by appointing Federal Commissioners and Military Governors from each of the twelve



states of the federation then. He also argues that further influenced the entrenchment of the Federal Character principle in the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Nigerian Government has often argued this controversial provision was primarily inserted to allay the fears of the different sections of the country. Since then, the principle has remained very crucial to the political survival of the country (Olaniyi, 2004:48).

Violent political conflicts and crises, by their nature, raise tempers and build barriers to communal understanding which is needed for any type or level of development. No nation or society has been known to grow beyond its present state in the time of crises or destabilizing conflicts. Some of the root causes of political conflicts in the various regions that make up Nigeria are summarized by IPCR (2003:141-146) as cited in Gandu (2005:138) thus:

1. Feelings of alienation and the struggle for recognition
2. Fear of domination
3. State formation, delineation and contestation of borders
4. Access to political power
5. Lack of internal party democracy
6. Manipulation of the political process and political thuggery
7. Disrespect for the rule of law
8. Second/third term syndrome
9. Non-implementation of previous findings of panels of inquiry
10. Government insensitivity and non consultation with the needs and grievances of the public
11. Ineffective and biased judicial system

The obvious situation in all of these scenarios is that the media professional is often “caught in the clash of counter claims and charges”, if I am allowed the use of the popular hemistich of the renowned poet, J.P. Clark. Nigerian born media practitioners or professionals practising in Nigeria are members of the various cultural expressions plaguing the Nigerian political environment. If Aristotle’s equation of man as “a political animal” has humanistic fervour in the larger contextual meaning, it then implies that reporters have political emotions, which can taint their political reports. This could be very dangerous in a third world nation largely populated by illiterates or semi illiterates and are variously characterised as multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic and highly complicated entity called Nigeria. This therefore underscores the need to ensure societal and in particular media freedoms for the Nigerian media industry to play its watchdog role.

Ekeanyanwu (2007) further argues that in reporting political conflicts, the reporter should never be an interested player or combatant no matter the level of provocation or involvement of his personal values or ethnocentric feelings. The reporter, he opines, should be guided at all times by his or her professional code of practice. In other words, in reporting political conflicts in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, the journalist must remain aloof so that the players can see him as being in the centre and consequently listen and heed to his call.

The political conflict reporter must therefore uphold the principle of “The Fairness Doctrine” in his coverage of political conflicts. The Fairness Doctrine states that media

organizations must get the views of opposing forces or parties in a conflict situation before going to press. This doctrine helps to maintain the sanctity of objectivity or at least transparency in media business. The political conflict reporter must therefore make concerted efforts to hear from every side in the controversy and see to it that their opinions are adequately presented even if they run contrary to the reporter's values and personal stand on the issue. This way the press in a pluralistic society could be seen as an unbiased umpire in the analysis, interpretation and subsequent resolution of political conflicts and crises (Ekeanyanwu, 2007).

The issue of political conflict in our society has generated great interest in the people. In this regard, the press, serving as "the eyes and ears" of the society has in one way or the other played immense role in the reportage of conflict be it ethnic, economic, political, cultural etc. Consequently, in a study titled "*The Nigerian Press and Political Conflict Reporting: A Case study of the Ngige-Uba Political Conflict in Anambra State*", Ekeanyanwu (2005) focuses on the role and involvement of the Nigerian press in political conflict reporting; identifying their lapses, commending their efforts and giving suggestions to the workings of the media. From the analysis of the study findings, the Nigerian mass media still have a lot to learn in the reportage of crisis and its management. In the study, it was found that 60% of the entire reports were mainly news stories, which are devoid of depth analysis and nuances. It was also found out that the press focuses more on personalities instead of the issues. These the researcher declares will not help the press in crisis management.

McCombs and Mauro (1977), Gerbner et al (1982), Chaffee et al (1970), and Sandman et al (1976) (All cited in Umechukwu, 2001) all agree that the media are agents of political communication and propaganda. Omu (1978) notes, "The early Nigerian press was essentially a political press which took on the opposition to the government" Galadima & Enighe (2001:64) support this view thus: "The press was owned and run by nationalists to confront the colonial government. It was 'press of protest' in which, Babatunde Jose said, seditious and criminally libellous articles were written against the colonial government in the name of nationalism. However, this helped in the constitutional reforms and the granting of self-government to the nationalists"

Many scholars agree about the role the media could play in political reporting which is a primary area of development in any polity. Politics without so much emphasis on bitterness, which causes conflicts, determines the well-being of a society. Even development communication has a political undertone or colouration. Politics in this part of the globe is simply concerned with acquiring or exercising political power within a group or an organization or a state. In the view of Uzoegbunam (1977) cited in Umechukwu (2001), discussing the concepts of power, dominations, control, influence, society and class brought together for the working of a people in a territory means discussing politics.

Shaw and McCombs (1977:106) did a comprehensive work on agenda setting and are in acknowledgement of the fact that media surveillance of events and issues revolves around setting agenda for civic concern and action. This is politically significant. Generally, it is held that media professionals or reporters determine what news is and by so doing determine what

gets mentioned or discussed on a daily basis. Undesirable political conditions that may be tolerated while they remain obscure may quickly become intolerable in the glare of publicity (Umechukwu, 2001:103). McCombs and Mauro (1977) on their part note that the media also provide clues to the public about the degree of importance of an issue. Political issues covered more prominently by the media are likely to be considered most important by the media audience (Ekeanyanwu, 2007).

Blumler cited in Umechukwu (2001:104) points to the fact that the mass media, while surveying the environment, functions essentially as agencies of social legitimating concerns – as forces, which reaffirm those ultimate value standards and beliefs, which in turn, upholds the social and political status quo. Since the media are the eyes and ears of the citizens, their means of surveillance which tell them about political conditions, economic and social conditions, journalists need to be more objective in news reporting and imbibe a crusading posture in order to influence public opinion. It is through the gathering and dissemination of information that the people are assured that their political system is still relevant despite the predisposition to trial and error mechanism. This is very vital if the people must have peace of mind. This is the hallmark of good journalism.

The Nigerian mass media could also perform the function of promoting political socialization and mobilization. Gerbner et al (1982:101) in this line, view the mass media as “the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality”. Kraus and Davies (1976), and Chaffee et al (1970) empirically support this. These mass communication scholars and media researchers all agree that the mass media are the primary agents of political socialization. To corroborate this view, Umechukwu (2001:106) notes thus:

This being the case, the Nigerian mass media should present political values that will lead to reforms since media-cultivated facts and values are standard by which we can judge. Once basic orientations towards the political system have been formed, attitudes usually stabilize and later learning largely supplements and refines earlier notions. Much of what the average person learns about political norms, rules, values, and events...necessarily come from the mass media. People’s opinion, feelings, and evaluation about political system may spring from their own processing of facts supplied by the media. It is, therefore, imperative that journalists should task themselves with supplying the right political values, which would create response from the people.

The dangerous nature of reporting politics and political conflicts in the absence of societal and media freedoms is compounded by the cultural dialectics of the Nigerian situation. There is therefore a dire need to review the concept of culture so that journalists are better equipped to grapple with its implications in conflict coverage.

Culture is a universal concept and experience. In the Western world, there is a narrow view of culture, which restricts its meaning to ideas, values and attitudes. On the other hand, Africans look at culture as the preserved traditions or ways of life of their forefathers. Thus, most people limit the concept to such things as traditional dances, music, art, traditional

institutions and rites of passage such as marriage, birth, initiation, burial and the likes (Ajayi, 2009).

Continuing, Ajayi (2009:407) notes:

Though all these are aspects of culture, but not the totality of it. Culture is the established pattern of behaviour among a people, an all embracing and heterogeneous concept that encompasses every aspect of a man's life and experiences. It is perceived as a way of life or the totality of all human efforts and achievements in the struggle for survival in the midst of unfriendly and militant forces of nature. It is also the aggregate of all human inventions and discovery and the accumulation of socially acquired human characteristics. It is a collective and integrated whole, comprising everything about man's ideas, behaviour and products or anything relating to his needs as a social being. In other words, culture is the totality of the historical experience as a people, the values, the traditions, the beliefs, morals, world view and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society.

Ekeanyanwu (2011) observes that UNESCO's (1994) definition of culture is very instructive and very relevant to our discussion in this paper. Culture, from UNESCO's conceptualization is the whole complex of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. Culture is also the totality of human endeavours in a given time and place. People are constructs of their culture. Culture gives people their identity and dignity. It is every day expression and future aspirations.

Culture and development are intertwined because culture underpins development and reinforces it. That is why it is often said that a people without a culture are a people without a future or destiny (Ekeanyanwu, 2008). The World Book Encyclopedia (2005) also says culture consists of all the ideas, objects and ways of doing things created by a group. These include arts, beliefs, customs, innovations, language, technology and tradition. Culture also consists of learned ways of acting, feeling and thinking rather than biologically determined ways. Ukeje (1980) cited in Ekeanyanwu (2005) also defines culture as "a fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, methods of thinking, eating and talking, customs and institutions into which a member of a society is born."

### **Media Freedom, Politics and Culture: The American Example**

United States of America is an epitome of media freedom in practice. The level and nature of societal, political and cultural development of the United State of America is so up that the issues of media freedom are considered a given and constitutionally guaranteed. The American model of press freedom is so interesting and attractive to other nations because the freedoms enjoyed by the media are neither taken for granted nor are they given by the government; they are so unique because they are derived from the society itself.

Generally, there is press freedom in the Western World although there are remarkable differences in the different countries that make up the group. The threats to the practice of journalism are almost non-existence and where they exist, they barely raise their ugly heads because the society here is governed by freedom enshrined in the Constitution. However, the journalists and their media organizations are subject to the ordinary laws of the land, like any other body or institution. The media in the West can also carry out their “watchdog” and “crusade dog” roles without any form of fears or favour. The United States and Britain are the two group leaders in the developed world.

In the United States, for instance, the American press is free to constructively criticize the government and get away with it. The Watergate Scandal which led to the resignation of Richard Nixon - the first ever resident of that country to do so is a typical example of journalistic freedom. The Clinton – Monica Sex Scandal is another example where the press published what it considered of public interest and cared less about any big man whose ox is gored. During the 2000 US Presidential Election, some newspapers published a report on the Republican candidate, George Bush, who eventually won, on how he was caught and sentenced for drunken driving. In some Third World African nations, those reporters would have been dead now or languishing in jail. But in the US they are celebrated.

This radical journalism is flourishing in the US because the entire citizenry cherish freedom especially freedom of expression and to hold dissenting views. At a recent study visit to the United States, this author was told that the strength of the American people lies in tolerating what one does not like. This was very revealing for me.

To make sure these freedoms are not subject to manipulation of the type and temperament of the party in Government, they were also entrenched in the various constitutional instruments. In fact, the First Amendment to the American Constitution states that the Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of the press. The American people, like the other peoples of the West or First World are politically, economically, and culturally emancipated. Therefore, the press, which is a subset of that free society, cannot be left out without the same level of freedom. It goes to say that the freedom enjoyed by the Press in the First World is directly derivable from the very nature of the Western societies – which are also free. A society can only offer what it has.

Rossister (1960:189) as cited in Ekeanyanwu (2005) explains the nature of press freedom in the West thus:

Americans are a modern, industrialized people, citizens of a mass society, and they rely heavily on the instruments with which they communicate with one another – newspapers, radio, periodicals, books, advertising media and television – to keep the machinery of elections in purposeful motion.

Ogunsiji (1989:160) as cited in Ekeanyanwu (2005) supports the above assertion when he states that:

In the free World, publicity influences public opinion, which in turn influences government. The Western news media widen the theatre of political discussions and provide raw material for public opinion. They are sources of political messages, and information

about the public figures... it is because the western news media are free that they are able to mould public opinion, defend the people's right to know and safeguard against arbitrary use of power.

However, we must also note that the American press operates under democratic laws already in existence in the US Constitution. These laws guard against press irresponsibility, abuse of power and freedom. This is a clear indication that press freedom is not absolute in the West and nowhere in the world is freedom absolute. Even individual freedoms must be checked otherwise they will conflict with the freedom of others and lead to chaos and lawlessness in the society, opposite of what freedom was supposed to help achieve.

In summary, we can comfortably state categorically here that the American society is a free society. We can also confirm in this paper that the American people are free. Since media freedom is exercised on behalf of the people and derived from the larger societal freedom; media freedom in America is guaranteed and now an issue of societal conscience; what I also call "the conscience of the American society".

### **Ingredients of Media Freedom in America that Could Support Media Development in Nigeria**

Beyond the issue of the larger society being the true mother of any media freedom that will outlive any government in power in America, there are other vital factors that promote media freedom in the American nation. These other factors are regarded as ingredients that could grow the media industry in Nigeria. In other words, if the Nigerian media industry must grow to a desirable state as analyzed in this paper, these ingredients must be present in the Nigerian society or body polity.

One of such valid factors that support the development and sustenance of media freedom is constitutional guarantees and protection. The American Constitution has a bold statement on the freedom of information as captured in the First Amendment to the Constitution. The various interpretations, debates and court's pronouncements/judicial precedents on the First Amendment have further strengthened the First Amendment Rights as guaranteed in the American Constitution. This is a solid source of support for the media as they cover volatile political situations in a multicultural context.

Another critical factor that supports media freedom and practice in the United States is a strong democratic culture. Democracy is a major political ideology of the US, which obviously influences the practice of press freedom as a journalistic virtue. In fact, the world over, the US is regarded as the bastion of democracy. Freedom feeds on democracy which is now a culture in the US. In most cases, democracy is media freedom's greatest ally in political and conflict coverage.

Capitalism is another valid ingredient that supports media freedom in the US. Capitalism stimulates private ownership and participation of the media while democracy allows for freedom to operate without threats and anti-people rules and regulation. Political power usually rests with the Government. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely is a long standing adage that still makes sense even today. If you leave the establishment, ownership and entire operational base of any media system in the hands of the

Government of the day, as found in third world countries, the tendency to abuse such rights becomes very high. With capitalism, the Government's powers to regulate, control etc the media industry is seriously reduced to a mere spectator protecting the playing field. The invisible market forces are left in charge of determining performance, rewards system, entry and exists. This grows the level of professionalism and reassures the media practitioners to face their assignment passionately without fear or favour.

The fourth vital factor that has supported media freedom in the US is the presence of a virile judiciary and the rule of law. The judiciary interprets and adjudicates the law; making it a vital arm of governance. A strong judiciary that operates the rule of law in a democratic setting obviously strengthens media freedom and journalistic professionalism in such a State.

The fifth factor or ingredient of media freedom in America that could work well for the Nigerian situation is political emancipation. One thing is having a democratic culture in place; it is another issue altogether having the political maturity and emancipation to appreciate both the positive and negative outcomes of political contests. President Barack Obama was declared winner of the 2008 US Presidential Election and in less than 45minutes after the announcement from the electoral body, Senator John McCain, his main rival in the election has conceded defeat. This is political maturity that comes from being politically free. In that same election, America for the first time voted massively for a black President. This again smacks of political freedom to pursue ones political ideology and interests. In a typical American family, you can the wife belong to the Democratic Party and the husband is a staunch Republic and yet no fights and family crises as a result of that. This is political maturity and freedom that are urgently needed in the Nigerian political scene.

Another related ingredient that has sustained media freedom in America is economic emancipation. This is where I agree with the Marxian philosophy that the economy is the infrastructural base of any development. The American society cannot be described as a failed State economically unlike some third world countries. In essence, any society that cannot sustain its economy cannot also discuss media freedom. Therefore, solid economic structures must be in place in Nigeria for media freedom to thrive.

Another very important ingredient of media freedom in America that Nigeria could adopt to reach that stage is cultural emancipation and maturity. Americans are proud of who they are, their values, what they belief in and their culture generally. They are not afraid to have self or communal expression wherever they find themselves. This is needed to drive leadership of the globe. For the Nigerian media industry to cover politics and the conflicts that do arise from its coverage in a pluralistic society, its practitioners, professionals, various audiences and major stakeholders must have a sense of identity – cultural identity and grow it. They must also have a sense of communal identity and maturity and the narrative that comes from the centre and parts must reflect a people who are not afraid to say who they are and stand their grounds in the comity of nations. Nigerians in essence must belief in their cultural values, develop a sense of self/communal worth and accept who they are to grow any part of their industry, media inclusive.

In conclusion, the American model of a free press remains in hot demand because that has sustained the growth experienced in the American media industry. Again, this model is

strongly recommended for Nigeria not because it is coming from America but because it works. It is a type of freedom that grows out of peoples' natural setting and living. Media freedom is not "dashed" to the American media industry; it oozed out of societal and cultural emancipation supported by the various other ingredients of media freedom already highlighted above. In summary, Nigeria cannot talk about a high level of media freedom to cover a volatile political climate ridden with various conflicts that are tainted with ethnocentric sentiments if the ingredients of a virile press as seen in the American example are not consciously courted for possible enculturation and total acceptance without our usual attitude of trying to "home grown" our own values. We accepted democratic governance as the best available form of governance but instead of also accepting the culture and spirit behind democracy, we decided to home grown our own type of democracy, just to water our tasty ego of not being called a copycat or encouraging modern-day imperialism. Did it work for us? This is a simple question every Nigerian must answer for his or herself.

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