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Ethical dilemma revisited: PBO[1] newspapers and the professional elbowroom of the Nigerian journalist[2]

ABSTRACT

Focusing on politician-businessperson-owned (PBO) newspapers, the study examined how loyalty to the owners' multiple interests has reduced the professional elbowroom of the Nigerian journalist. Through in-depth interviews and textual analysis, the study found that journalists in PBO newspapers are extremely constrained on the kind of stories they write and how. Caught in the conflict between professionalism and pandering to the owners' layers of political and economic interests, many journalists submit, while some rebel. The narrowed elbowroom is a reason for many of the ethical violations among Nigerian journalists.

KEYWORDS

ethics
ethical dilemma
politician-businessperson-owned (PBO) newspapers
Nigerian media
democracy

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most influential scholarly piece in the study of media ethics in Nigeria is Bosah L. Ebo's 'The ethical dilemma of African journalists: a Nigerian perspective' published in 1994. The article identifies the major dilemma facing Nigerian journalists as arising from their commitment to professionalism, which required independence from government, and their commitment to

1. Politician-Businessperson-Owned (PBO) newspapers are those newspapers owned by politicians who are also businessperson.

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development, which required promoting government programmes. Theoretically, this is a play-out of the conflict between libertarian-social responsibility theory on the one hand and authoritarian-development media theory on the other (Siebert et al. 1956). Importantly, the article traces the conflict beyond the theoretical to the pedagogical by making the point that most Nigerian journalists had a strong commitment to professional independence because of their training in the United States or because the journalism schools they attended in Nigeria were modelled after American schools.

Ebo's (1994) article has influenced research in media ethics in Nigeria (see, for instance, Folarin 1998; Sulu-Raheem 2003), and it is compulsory reading in some journalism ethics classes. But the article was published in a dispensation that has passed away. The political, professional and economic contexts that informed the content of the article have undergone tremendous changes. First, Nigeria has undergone a transition from authoritarian military rule, under which it was when Ebo (1994) wrote his article, to civilian rule and has even conducted its first successful civilian-to-civilian transition. Second, the country has adopted neo-liberal policies, which implied government withdrawal from business and, in the case of government-owned media, greater dependence on advert-generated revenue than on government subvention.

As a result of the above changes and others, the media landscape is diametrically different from that of 1994. Journalists are much less prone to physical attacks and whimsical arrest and detention, but their dilemmas, in our view, rather than being simpler, are more complicated. The new power configurations in Nigeria and shifting ownership structure of the media complicate journalists' dilemma, and call for a deep, yet neglected, examination. There seems to be a convergence of power, business and media ownership in the hands of the same set of people. Our interaction with media executives for another study (Ojebode 2011) revealed that many of the leading 'independent' newspapers, radio and television houses are now owned fully or substantially by politicians who are in power, directly or by proxy. And the same politicians have major controlling shares in a number of leading business organizations. F. Ogundeji (2010) concluded that about 85 per cent of non-government newspapers and tabloids in Nigeria are owned by politicians who are also businessperson.

For the purpose of stylistic convenience, we refer to these media organizations as PBO (politician-businessperson-owned) media organizations. In this study, we ask: are there unique difficulties faced by the journalists who work in these organizations? Are the journalists in PBO media houses faced by just the dual forces of desire for professionalism and the demands of development journalism as Ebo (1994) argued? Or are there more conflicting forces? How much elbowroom do those journalists have to practise their profession?

Studies and commentaries on ethical issues among journalists in Nigeria (Adaba 2010; Asakitipi and Akujobi 2009; Ekpu 2005; Sulu-Raheem 2003; Idowu 1996) have focused predominantly on journalists' violation of ethics. More often than not, journalists turn up in these studies as insatiably greedy fellows who have thrown all ethics to the winds. But the studies pay little attention to the overall climate and milieu under which the journalists work, and if and how these make it difficult for the journalist to act otherwise. These studies have also been the scholars' own examination and interpretation of the perceived misdeeds of journalists. Not many of them have taken journalists' own perspectives as the basis for conclusions.

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This study adopted in-depth interviews with selected journalists in PBO media houses in seeking to explore if and how the existing power configurations restrict their professional elbowroom, and the outcomes of that restriction. In exploring the outcomes, we complemented the interviews with an analysis of the coverage of corruption trials of two politicians by the papers that the politicians owned or founded.

Journalists' elbowroom

A journalist's elbowroom is the extent of freedom she or he has to practise the profession. Another expression for this is the margin of freedom (Olorunnisola 2006). In autocratic societies, the journalists' elbowroom is expected to be narrow. That was the case in Nigeria during the military regime when the government placed a clear limit on how much freedom journalists had. Those journalists who attempted to widen their freedom beyond that limit were ruthlessly dealt with.

Just to illustrate the point: in 1990, the government of General Ibrahim Babangida arrested and detained about twenty journalists. The same year, he shut down several newspaper houses including *Vanguard*, *Punch*, *Lagos News* and *Newbreed* for their coverage of the coup attempt by some officers in April that year. In 1991, the same government proscribed all the five titles of Guardian Newspapers Limited and sealed up the premises of the newspaper. It also deported William Keeling of *Financial Times* for writing an article criticizing the mismanagement of oil windfalls administration (Olukotun 2005). Worse things than these happened under General Abacha who followed shortly after Babangida. Not only did Abacha torture and jail many more journalists, he also had the record of being the Head of State when several journalists 'disappeared'. Among them were Bagauda Kaltho (*The News*) who was abducted and killed, and Tunde Oladepo (*The Guardian*) who was killed in his house allegedly by the government's gunmen (Dare 2007; Malaolu 2005).

Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999. But it is important to ask the question: is the journalist's elbowroom as wide as it should be? Theorists, researchers and commentators on democracy disagree on definitions, descriptions and measures of democracy, but they agree on a number of basic characteristics. Features of democracy that cut across several theoretical positions and opinions include self-determination, periodic elections, citizens' engagement and presence of a free press (Karppinen 2007; Olorunnisola 2006; Post 2005; Jacka 2003; Habermas 1995). Based on this, it has been quite logically assumed that when a country, such as Nigeria, transits from military autocracy to democracy, the elbowroom of the press will remarkably widen.

However, many studies have confuted this assumption. A. A. Olorunnisola (2006) had warned that democratization is necessary but insufficient for all of the conditions essential for an increase in journalists' margin of freedom. The fact that more private players enter the media scene may not mean journalists would have a wider margin of freedom. Citing examples from African countries, Olorunnisola (2009: 86) shows that 'democratisation and liberalisation have not always guaranteed wider margins of freedom nor have they ensured that private enterprise media will display the calibre of independence that analysts take for granted'. Many reasons have been adduced for this paradox.

First, when democratization is not accompanied by economic independence of the press, the press still remains tied to state benevolence and cannot

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experience a remarkable margin of freedom. Some have observed that government subsidy (Olorunnisola 2006) or working in a government-owned media (Nyamnjoh 2001; Skjerdal and Lule 2009) cuts down the circumference of the journalist's elbowroom. This is not an unquestioned submission. For instance, C. Sparks (1992: 36), writing on the then newly democratized countries of Eastern Europe, argued that for the media 'to assist in the development of democracy … the reconstruction of public communication in Eastern Europe must make use of subsidies'. In spite of this disagreement, it seems possible to conclude that subsidies do have some influence on the journalist's circumference of elbowroom.

Second is lack of professionalism among journalists. Several studies on corruption among journalists (Lodamo and Skjerdal 2009; Ojebode 2009; Soola 2008; Nyamnjoh 2001) suggest that unethical practices such as bribe-taking and hate mongering often, in the long run, become a hindrance to the journalist's full access to the required elbowroom. This is closely linked to journalists' involvement with politicians as media consultants and speech writers. It was in the light of this that F. Nyamnjoh (2001) describes newspapers in Cameroon as poorly concealed party spokespersons.

Third is the influence of business. For obvious reasons, business interferes with the press. Most press organizations depend on advertisement revenues. This requires a good deal of interaction with the business world. In many cases, this interaction has opened journalists and their organizations up to unethical influences by business organizations. Stories that may jeopardize the interests of major advertising organizations are sometimes ignored or downplayed (Ojebode 2009; Soola 2008). The camaraderie between the business world and the press has been the cause of worry in many developed nations (McChesney and Nichols 2002; Gurevitch and Blumler 1990). Added to this is the fact that press organizations are themselves businesses and attempt is made to attract and retain large audiences (Sparks 1992). Doing this may require prodding journalists to consider 'saleability' as a news quality, something they probably would not normally do.

Fourth is the influence of owners of the media. Sparks (1992: 42) says, 'it is difficult to see how there could ever be any system of newspaper ownership in which the owner did not exercise some influence'. Many owners have interests that cross political and economic terrains. Subtly, or otherwise, these owners are able to influence how much margin of freedom the journalist has. This has been the justification offered by those who kick against media merger and acquisition. When large corporations takeover smaller existing media outlets, diversity of voices is reduced and the marketplace of ideas is muted. This means that individual journalists in the former independent media outlets must conform to the preferences of the new corporations for which they now work (Ragnedda and Muschert 2010; Ojebode 2009; Olorunnisola 2006; Ginsborg 2005; McChesney and Nichols 2002; McChesney 1999).

The importance of ownership of the media is not lost on politicians. An unparalleled example of a politician who appreciates the link between media ownership and political success is former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Said to be the richest man in Italy, Mr Berlusconi controlled 'approximately 90% of Italian National TV, two national newspapers and several large-circulating news magazines … the copyright on a quarter of Italian books … and 60% of all TV advertising sales' (Ragnedda and Muschert 2010: 14). Many traced his past electoral successes and his ability to wade through all of his many scandals to his ownership and, of course, control

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Newspaper	Strength of paper*	Founder/owner	Political affiliation/position
The Sun	One of the top 10 newspapers nationally	Mr Orji Uzor Kalu	Former Governor of Abia State under People's Democratic Party, now in People's Progressive Alliance (PPA)
The Nation	One of the top 10 newspapers nationally	Mr Bola A. Tinubu	Former Governor of Lagos under Action Congress of Nigeria
National Life	Known in Lagos	Mr Bola A. Tinubu	Former Governor of Lagos under Action Congress of Nigeria
Daily Independent	One of the top 10 newspapers in Port Harcourt	Mr James Ibori	Former Governor of Delta State under People's Democratic Party
Compass	One of the top 10 newspapers nationally	Mr Gbenga Daniel	Former Governor of Ogun State under People's Democratic Party
Champion	One of the top 10 newspapers nationally	Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu	Leading politician in the People's Democratic Party

* From Advertising Association of Nigeria (ADVAN) (2009).

Table 1: Some of the PBO newspapers in Nigeria.

of such large sections of the Italian media (Ragnedda and Muschert 2010; Ginsborg 2005).

In Nigeria, there were politician-owners of media. As F. I. A. Omu (1996) and R. Ekpu (2005) amply show, the early Nigerian newspapers were founded by politicians who overtly deployed them as political tools. There is little doubt that such overbearing ownership did greatly compromise the margin of freedom of the journalists in their employment. As it was then, media ownership is still significantly in the hands of politicians. Now, the situation has changed with many newspapers being owned by politicians who are also businessperson. Preliminary investigations reveal that five of the top ten newspapers in Nigeria are owned by top politicians.

Many of these also own several FM and television stations. Importantly, they are also large-scale businesspeople. Whereas the owners of the early newspapers were simply politician-owners, the last one decade has seen a sharp rise in the number of politician-businessperson-owners of media houses.

This study is an attempt to explore how the convergence of powers limits the Nigerian journalist's professional freedom, as well as the ethical compromises that journalists working in these PBO media organizations have to make. In addition to interviewing concerned journalists, we also analyse how these organizations cover two cases of corruption involving their employers.

METHODOLOGY

This study combines in-depth interviews with textual analysis. This combination allowed us to probe answers and comments of selected journalists, as well examine how the issues raised by the journalists play out in their newspapers' reports of cases of corruption involving their owners. The study focused on newspaper journalists working in PBO newspaper organizations belonging to prominent politicians.

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Thirty-one such journalists agreed to be interviewed, though we approached 35 of them. These were taken from four PBO media houses. Our selection method was thus a combination of purposive and available sampling. We hasten to accept that these are not as statistically strong as non-probabilistic sampling techniques; the nature of the study, however, makes them the only ones suitable. A fourteen-item interview guide was used to steer the interviews. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, and were conducted between May and August 2011. In analysing the interviews, we paid attention to emerging themes and issues across the 31 interviews, moving from codes to concepts and to categories. In keeping with our promise to the interviewees, in this report, we reveal neither the names of the respondents nor the organizations for which they worked.

All of the governors who founded the papers listed earlier had been taken to court on allegations of corruption by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). We selected two of these cases to analyse how their newspapers framed them. We chose those of Mr Orji U. Kalu, owner of *The Sun*, and Mr James Ibori, owner of *Daily Independent*. The rationale for choosing these two was that they were the two most celebrated and prolonged court cases involving the governors. Mr Kalu was the governor of Abia State for eight years starting from 1999. He was accused of graft involving N5 billion (about US$32 million) and was arraigned at the Federal Capital Territory High Court, in Abuja in 2007 on a 107-count charge. He was arrested in July 2007, detained for about two weeks and granted bail. The case is still pending (Vanguard 2011; BBC 2007).

Mr James Ibori was governor of Delta State for eight years starting from 1999. He was accused of embezzling N9.2 billion (about US$59 million), and illegally disposing of shares belonging to his state worth N44 billion (about US$282 million). He was arrested in December 2007, arraigned on a 170-count charge but acquitted of all of them by a court sitting in Asaba, capital of his state. He was again arrested in Dubai for money laundering and transferred to London where two of his associates had been convicted of money laundering and were serving a five-year prison term each. In London, he was convicted and jailed in 2012 (Vanguard 2011, 2010; Anon. 2010).

We hasten to acknowledge the difficulty in analysing the press coverage of an ongoing issue. That explains our decision to limit this to the arrest and initial trial of the governors. We also limited our investigation to the papers that the governors owned. Our sample selection was thus purposive. We fished out only the stories that dealt with their arrests and trials. On Mr Kalu's case, we found 41 such stories in *The Sun* running from 13 July 2007 to 21 February 2008 when the paper stopped publishing stories on the case. On Mr Ibori's case from *Daily Independent*, we found 44 stories running from September 2007 to October 2009. In both cases, we concentrated on news, editorials and features.

From our reading of the political, ethnic and cultural layout of Nigeria, we identified two broad frames as tools for the textual analysis:

Corruption fight: Reports that look at the arrests and trials of the governors as part of the national anti-corruption crusade fall in this category. These reports consider the arrests and trials as part of the usual prosecution procedure.

Victimization: Reports that look at the arrest as unfair victimization of the governors belong here. Such reports are expected to take up defence of the governors and frame the arrest and trial not as corruption fight but as a political, economic,

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religious or ethnic issue. Such reports are also expected to fault the stand and procedure of the anti-corruption body, the EFCC. In this broad frame, we consider sub-frames such as ethnic frame, religious frame and political frame.

We submitted the first draft of this report for member check to two journalists who worked in PBO newspapers. Their comments largely confirmed our interpretations. They, however, wanted a stronger stress on the link between poor remuneration and brown envelope journalism, but we thought the point was already made as it was especially since it had been the subject of much literature (Lodamo and Skjerdal 2009; Soola 2008).

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the outcomes of our analysis of the interviews. This is followed by reports of the frame analysis.

PROPRIETOR, PARTY, PARTNERSHIP AND PROJECTS

The picture given by our interviewees was that of professionals who had little freedom to practise their professions. Most interviewees strongly underscored their commitment to professionalism but also emphasized the 'wall of obstacles' that they face in their attempt to stick to professional standards. Interviewees talked of wanting to do what was right but being prohibited from doing it. Analysis showed that each newspaper had a string of untouchables; against these, reporters were not allowed to write.

The most often mentioned untouchable entities were the owner of the newspaper and his party. Interviewees talked of 'important stories' that they wrote but which were killed because they were considered unpleasant to the person or the political party of their owners. 'Pleasantness', according to them, was determined by the editors. The reporters also claimed that on many occasions they did not even attempt to write such a story. An interviewee claimed:

> When [the] former governor … had a problem with EFCC, and police moved in to arrest him in his hometown where youths formed a defence wall against his arrest, I had a strong story and a police source … on the route he planned to [take to] escape out of the country but I couldn't write the story because I knew it would never go into publication. He eventually escaped …

Family members and friends of the proprietor should also not be touched. A reporter related her experience when the then Minister of Health, Professor Adenike Grange, was indicted in a misappropriation deal. 'She happens to be my chairman's family friend, so we on the health desk could not even write or even analyse the situation'.

Editors also rejected or rewrote stories that portray the proprietor's political party negatively. A reporter told us that he was sent to cover the convention of the political party of his proprietor, but the convention was cancelled when it degenerated into violence with resulting injuries. From the venue, he sent in his reports with photographs of fights and injuries. The editor accepted but totally rewrote the report:

> The following day, all I saw was that the convention [was] postponed, my name was there as the reporter. Nothing about fight or violence.

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> When I protested, my editor said 'we asked you to cover convention not street fight'.

The same protection is spread over the business interests of the proprietor and those of his friends and associates. Proprietor's businesses were referred to as 'our indirect owners' in a particular newspaper establishment. If the businesses were just advertisers, they are called 'our partners'.

In addition to protecting the person, networks and businesses of the proprietor, newspaper managements also enter into unwritten agreements with politicians, especially state governors. The agreement, our interviewees noted, involved reporting the activities of the state governors always positively and those of his opponents always negatively. In three of the newspaper organizations from which we drew interviewees, this agreement is called 'project'. It was common, interviewees noted, to bring a story against a state governor and be told that 'we have a project with that state'. To honour the agreement, the governors, through their aides, directed all their announcements and advertisements to the newspapers. It was also claimed that they instructed all government offices in the state to buy copies of the newspapers with which they have 'project'. A reporter told of how, when he was 'just coming into the business', he brought a good story against a governor, not his proprietor and how the editor responded:

> We have a project with this state, and it runs into millions. So, if you want this story to go, go and bring at least one million naira.

Interviewees agreed that they were expected to select stories that were favourable to the proprietor, ignore those that were negative about the proprietor, ignore those that were favourable to the proprietor's opponents and select those that were negative about the proprietor's opponents. They noted that their lack of professional freedom cut across various aspects of news writing, not just news selection. News framing and source selection were also carefully done to arrive at stories that pleased the establishment.

Often, the list of untouchables was not finite. As party affiliations changed, and as business interests waxed or waned, the composition of that list also changed. Interviewees claimed that many times they were confused.

> I wrote a story about the deplorable state of schools in a PDP state. I never thought it would be published in our paper. When I asked why it was published, my editor said the governor and our *oga* [proprietor] now belong to different [opposing] factions within PDP. Things change. You are never sure.

Another told of the day their managing editor walked into the newsroom and 'jokingly announced that our paper was about to be bought by Tinubu',[3] which meant the paper would now begin to praise the people it had been opposing. 'We all joked about deleting anti-Tinubu files from our heads and uploading pro-Tinubu files'. The uncertainty and impermanence require that reporters check with editors regularly over most stories.

We confronted our interviewees with the case of *The Guardian*, which reported with remarkable objectivity the arrest and trial of the proprietor's sister-in-law over corrupt practices. Their responses fell into two major explanations: *The Guardian* was not owned by a politician, and it had immense

3. Mr Tinubu is former governor of Lagos and Leader of Action Congress of Nigeria, a party that is in opposition nationally but in power in some states.

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editorial independence. Politician-owners, it seemed, presented tougher restrictions on journalists than any other categories of owners did.

Blending, subverting and rebelling

We probed how journalists responded to the restrictions they described. Our analysis revealed three types of response. The first is what may be described as blending. The interviewees told us that they had to 'blend with the system' and 'play the game according to the management's desires'. This requires dropping as much as possible, professional convictions and principles and working according to the dictates of the proprietor often as (re)presented by the editors. An interviewee said:

> You have to redefine everything. What is news? What is newsworthy? Textbook definitions are not practicable here. News is what the proprietor wants. Or what the editor tells you that the proprietor wants.

Many claimed that they found this to be a difficult but unavoidable choice. Reasons were also given why this was considered by many as the only option.

Fully blended journalists become a part of the system so much that detecting the management's preference became easier, and working according to that preference became almost volitional. Expressions that reflect this level of organizational enculturation in the interviews included 'seeing things that way' 'personally understand', and 'somehow become convinced'. An interviewee said:

> I personally find it difficult to write negative stories about Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and their candidates … it is sometimes also difficult to write many positive stories about politicians or office holders of other political parties. It's like, you just don't see such stories.

We found it interesting that our interviewees talked of blending as undesirable but inevitable. They also made effort to describe themselves as unwilling to blend or not having blended.

The second type of response is what we describe as 'subverting'. Some journalists, finding that their newspapers would not publish the kind of stories they found, passed such stories over to their colleagues working for another 'enemy' newspaper, which in many cases was delighted to have such stories. Interviewees gave instances when they had to do this, including giving such stories to colleagues in the broadcast media. At the end, 'one is happy that the public gets to know the truth'.

Rebelling is the third type of response. None of our interviewees had rebelled, but they knew colleagues who had. Rebelling journalists keep submitting stories that were unacceptable to the establishment and refuse to rewrite such stories. But this has consequences. An interviewee told us:

> Two of my friends were forced to resign their appointments at *Nigerian Compass* and *National Mirror* because of their refusal to be biased in their reportage.

Mild sanctions might be redeployment to 'dull and boring beats'.

Journalists who claimed to subvert or rebel appeared to be really torn between pleasing the management and practising the profession. Some of them

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describe the sense of guilt that accompanied some of the acts of pleasing the management, such as unfair reporting, inaccuracy and ignoring whole stories.

> I tell myself, boy, you are not a professional; you are just an errand boy. Because I really want to practise the profession; tell the truth, accuracy and objectivity, you know?

Subverting or rebelling was a search for outlet through which the journalist can experience professionalism.

BROWN ENVELOPES: EXCUSES OR JUSTIFICATIONS?

All interviewees agreed that many Nigerian journalists take part in 'brown envelope' or 'cash and carry' journalism. This ranges from demanding money in order to kill a negative story or to write a positive one, accepting dubious freebies and so on. Mention was made of editors on the payroll of governors.

Our interviewees were also emphatic that they did not take part in such practice, and that those who did were much fewer than was usually alleged. But then they insisted that there was nothing wrong in being 'financially appreciated' by someone who was pleased with the story that you did about him, his business, government or party. If it comes after the story has been published, they noted, you could not say it influenced the story. Our interviewees agreed that they received such 'thank you' occasionally.

According to them, journalists practised brown envelope journalism because they 'are underpaid and overworked'. One said:

> Some journalists are owed as much as five to seven months salary at a stretch. How do you expect such a person to cope? What with tenancy bills, school fees, and other utility bills. … Looking at the welfare package of our journalists, you can't really blame them for taking brown envelopes.

It was not clear how our interviewees who claimed not to indulge in brown envelope journalism coped with poor pay and irregular remuneration. Another reason given for brown envelope journalism was lack of job security. A journalist may be dismissed by his/her employers for any reason. As a result of this uncertainty, our interviewees noted, there is desperation to 'make as much money as you can while you are employed'.

Another reason given was the 'bandwagon' influence of senior editors. It was alleged that senior editors received large amounts of money from politicians who needed positive coverage or wanted the concerned newspaper to kill a negative story. Many of the editors, however, did not share the money with the reporters. It was the duty of the reporter to find his own brown envelope.

How The Sun and Daily Independent *framed proprietors' arrests and trials*

Our findings from the frame analysis were not surprising. Of the 85 stories we coded, only four (4.7 per cent) presented the arrests and trials of the governor-proprietors as part of the process of the anti-corruption fight. Three of these came from *Daily Independent*'s framing of James Ibori's trial and one from *The Sun*'s framing of Orji Kalu's trial. The bulk (95.3 per cent) framed the arrest as victimization of the governors. Figure 1 gives a general overview of the distribution of the stories.

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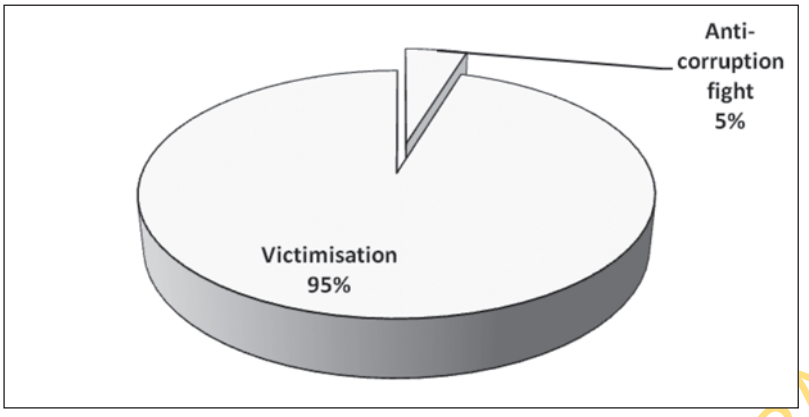

Figure 1: Newspapers' framing of corruption cases involving their proprietors.

Political victimization was the predominant sub-frame, taking up to 59.3 per cent of the stories on victimization. The accused governors were presented as rising political stars whose brilliant performances as governors and bright chances of occupying higher political offices made their political enemies jittery or jealous. The enemies, using the EFCC as a tool, resorted to 'mixing anti-corruption crusade with hidden political objectives on one hand, and resorting to impunity on the other hand' (Anon. 2007a, front page). Figure 2 shows the dominance of political victimization sub-frame over others.

In the case of Kalu, the alleged political victimizer was former President Olusegun Obasanjo with whom he had had disagreements. An editorial from *The Sun* alleged that Obasanjo hated Kalu because

> Orji Uzor Kalu as governor of Abia State saw through the mountain of lies and deceit erected by Olusegun Obasanjo as the President of Nigeria, and sought to demolish it.
>
> (Anon. 2008: 8)

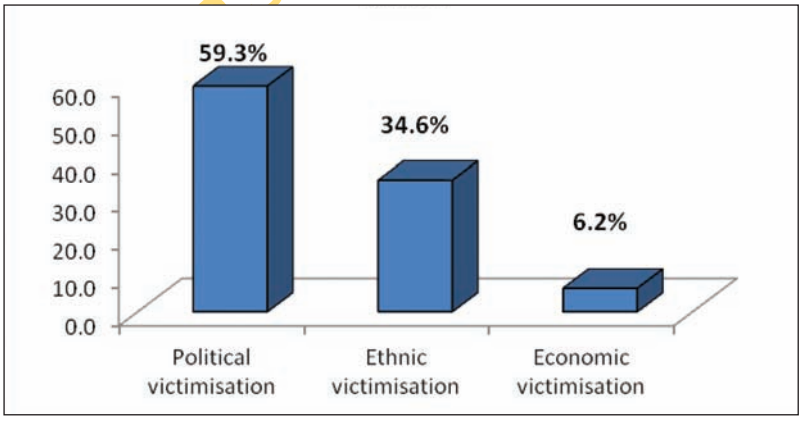

Figure 2: Victimisation sub-frames adopted by newspapers in covering corruption cases involving their owners.

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The alleged victimizer, in the case of Ibori was Mr Nuhu Ribadu, chairman of EFCC, who hated Ibori because of Ibori's 'refusal to assist him (Ribadu) to become the Inspector General [of Police], a post he lobbied for without success' (Fadeyi 2009, front page). Some elders of Delta State were also named among the persecutors of the former governor.

Stories framing the events as ethnic persecution were 34.6 per cent of stories that adopted the victimization frame, while 6.2 per cent of 'victimization' stories considered the events as economic persecution. No stories adopted religious persecution frames.

The Sun particularly emphasized the ethnic frame, stressing that the arrest and trial were 'an attempt to further ridicule the Igbo race' (Onuoha 2007: 6). The story wonders why 'out of 35 governors who ended their tenure on May 29, the EFCC was in a hurry to arraign the former Abia State governor [without hearing] his own side of the allegations made against him'. To emphasize the ethnic dimension of the trial, *The Sun* reported several meetings of Igbo ethnic organizations, which declared support for Kalu and condemned his persecution.

The 'victimization' stories also attacked the persecutors and celebrated the victories of their proprietors. The EFCC in particular was painted as vindictive and incompetent. To show that EFCC's ineptitude and 'smokescreen' (Nwosu 2007, front page) had been uncovered, *The Sun* reported protest marches in the United States and United Kingdom in support of Kalu. It claimed some of the marches were organized by Nigerians overseas and some by 'black and white American friends of Kalu'. American and British 'governments' were also reported as speaking up in favour of Kalu (Nnamdi 2007a: 4; Anon. 2007b, front page). *Daily Independent*, on its part, celebrated Ibori's 'string of court victories' (Nwankwo 2007, front page) recorded in London and Nigerian courts.

As we observed at the beginning of this section, the framing of the arrests and trials is not surprising. What is, however, is the extent to which the papers went to defend their proprietors. There were distortion and outright lies. For instance, in the story 'US Demands Kalu's Release', the writer claimed that 'America is demanding the immediate release of former Abia State governor … describing his arrest as inconsistent with the rule of law' (Nnamdi 2007b: 8). The story contains the photograph of American president George Bush (Jr). But the real person who spoke (if anyone did) was an unnamed 'top official of US Department'. In addition to this, the line separating news, analysis and opinions also became blurred. Both newspapers went into mudslinging. For instance, *Daily Independent* accused EFCC men of stealing Ibori's mobile phone (Bakoji 2008); *The Sun* accused another governor who, it claimed, should have also been arrested, of bribing the president with 'N5 billion of his loot … to ensure his protection' (Ita 2007: 5).

DISCUSSION

To summarize the findings of this study, we would say that although Nigeria is a democracy, journalists working in PBO media organizations have little elbowroom to operate professionally. When they take their hands off negative stories about the proprietors, their network of friends and relatives, their political parties and businesses, the pool from which to fish becomes quite narrow. In their show of loyalty and in defence of 'daily bread', they have become combative and unethical. We can forecast that they would be

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this way (biased and combative) in matters that concern these afore-named entities.

Several studies have shown that ownership influence on media position and performance can be visible and substantial (Ragnedda and Muschert 2010; Ginsborg 2005; Ekpu 2005; Kadhi 1999; Sparks 1992). However, the near-total control that we deduced from the claims of the journalists and from the textual analysis seems to be on a scale greater than what is found in the literature. In the literature, owners' influence tends to be felt in somewhat intangible areas such as providing ideological moorings for the news organization. In extreme cases, such as those reported by Ekpu (2005), owners of the early Nigerian newspapers, some of whom were also journalists, simply turned their newspapers to weapons of political warfare. That was bad enough, but the situation of journalists in PBO newspapers in contemporary Nigeria is likely worse. Politician-owners nowadays have more business ventures than had the early politicians. Therefore, the list of untouchables, which journalists had then, if there was any, was certainly shorter than the list that exists today. Added to this is the fact that contemporary politics is heavily mediatized unlike what obtained in the early 1960s that Ekpu (2005) described. Now, there is growing departure from party-based and ideology-based politics to media-based politics (Coleman 2011). The individual politician, rather than the party, has become the centre of campaigns. Media images of politicians are therefore very crucial and politicians thus have reason for wanting to acquire media organizations and to be more overbearing than they were.

Studies that have focused on corruption in the media in Africa (Lodamo and Skjerdal 2009; Soola 2008; Nyamnjoh 2001) have documented corrupt practices even at a larger scale than is done by this study. For instance, N. T. Ekeanyanwu and N. O. Obianigwe (2009) reported that 61 per cent of the journalists they surveyed claimed that they regularly received 'brown envelopes'. C. Nwabueze (2010) found that 84 per cent of his respondents did receive the same regularly. This study gives us a basis to agree with these existing studies that brown envelope journalism is a product of poor remuneration, greed and systemic corruption running from the proprietor through top management down to the reporters. It is also a reflection of the corruption in the wider society. But the reason for brown envelope journalism is beyond all of these.

Is there a tenable link between the shrinking professional elbowroom of journalists and their resort to brown envelope journalism? We argue that journalists whose professional freedom is severely limited by the interests of the proprietor have the tendency to think that the whole idea of professionalism and professional etiquette is not worth their loyalty, commitment and sacrifice. Abstention from gratification, fairness and objectivity are all bundled up in professionalism along with the professional freedom to decide what news is and what should be the news frame. The point at which this freedom is taken away is a short step from throwing away all the other elements of professionalism.

The foregoing leads to the question of whether or not one can raise issues of ethical dilemma among Nigerian journalists. Ethics is an issue only where the individual moral agent has the freedom to make choices, that is, the required elbowroom. Our analysis strongly suggests that the elbowroom of journalists in these PBO newspapers is too strait to allow volitional ethical decisions on the major aspects of the journalistic process. Thus, there may be

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some unfairness in the preponderance to focus on ethical failings of journalists, as is commonly done in the literature.

On a larger theoretical plane, one might describe the situation in Nigeria as a paradox, or in the words of Olorunnisola (2006) 'theoretical incongruence'. When political transition is not accompanied by transition from an authoritarian to a libertarian press situation, it is theoretically incongruent. More than that, the situation we have described suggests the need to revisit given concepts such as 'authoritarianism' and 'press freedom'. Literature on authoritarian theory, starting from the original F. S. Siebert et al. (1956), often conceives of the 'authority' as government, more specifically 'national' government. This is understandable since the theories sought to describe nations and their political-press systems. The theory, however, does not anticipate individual wealthy politicians who, in a pseudo-democracy like Nigeria, can become 'authority' on their own to the point of stifling the freedom of those who work in their press establishments. Therefore, we can say that rather than expanding press freedom, political transition in Nigeria seems to have given rise to a new species of authoritarian press system.

There is the need to review the concept of 'free press'. Popular assessments of press freedom (e.g. Freedom House 2011) calculate press freedom in terms of frequency of arrest and physical harassments of journalists. The less frequent these are, the greater the freedom of the press in the concerned nation is said to be. This explains why Nigeria's press freedom index seems to be on a steady climb since return to democracy (Freedom House 2002, 2010, 2011). Yet, many journalists do not have the professional freedom they need. Reducing press freedom to absence of physical harassment and legal restraints misses out on the dimensions of 'unfreedom' that the current study shows.

CONCLUSION

In their engaging review of the 'ages' of political communication, K. Brants and K. Voltmer (2011: 4) noted that the relationship between the media and politicians has gone through a linear movement from the first age when the media were subordinate to political actors who were 'able to instrumentalise them for their own purposes', to the age of a balanced relationship between both media and political actors, and to the current age of 'media-centred political process that is dominated with the media's logic of presenting political matters'. From all indications, the press in Nigeria are still largely in the first age. All ethical assessments must take this into consideration.

In concluding, we make suggestions on how to expand the elbowroom of journalists in Nigeria. We recommend that there should be regulation to media ownership in Nigeria, to reduce excessive concentration of media power in the hands of few rich individual politicians. As it is, there is no limit to the number of radio and television stations and newspapers that an individual can establish. This will be a major way of preserving diversity in the marketplace of ideas. By this suggestion, we do not imply that a limit to the journalist's elbowroom should be erected; Nigeria's experiences with military trample on media freedom are quite fresh in the minds of the citizens. What we suggest rather is a framework that regulates ownership.

In addition to this, we suggest that government or international donor agencies should consider funding the establishment of 'union-owned' independent newspapers in Nigeria. The Nigerian Union of Journalists can be

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assisted to establish a newspaper that they will manage. Since the union is made up of professionals, not politicians, one could expect that the newspaper will be indeed independent.

We recommend a network among journalists in different PBO and other media houses. The network should allow them to exchange news stories that are important, but which cannot be published in the media organization for which the original writer works. This should be of help to 'subverting' and 'rebelling' journalists. Then those who are torn between pleasing the proprietor and getting the story out can have an outlet for getting the story and enjoying a sense of professional fulfilment.

Finally, Nigerian journalism schools should continue their emphasis on journalism ethics. There will be need for a critical mass of journalists driven by ethics and professionalism who will fill the space when truly independent media establishments emerge in Nigeria.

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