

Newspaper stands as centres of social consciousness in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The existing interaction between newspaper stands and Nigerian readers transcends market exchange. It is rather a place for engendering social consciousness among a people, desirous of being abreast of up-to-date information, but lacking requisite finance. Thus, a practice which evolved out of peoples' financial incapability has become a catalyst for the congregation of individuals at newspaper stands to access news at minimal cost, for social interaction and possible social consciousness. This depicts a public sphere where people have "shared interest". Thus, the newspaper stand presents as public sphere where shared public interest reported in newspapers ignites deliberative discourses which hugely impacts social consciousness among discussants and listening by-standers.

Key words: Newspapers; Newspaper Stands; Social Consciousness; Public Sphere and Shared Interest.

INTRODUCTION

Expressive culture is a significant and crucial means of revealing people's will, world views and experiences. It is also a passage of expressing conscious and/or unconscious histories of struggle to humanise the society (Muyumba 1993; Falah, Flint and Mamadouh 2006; Grindstaff 2008; Polletta 2008). Similarly, the news media is one of the significant means through which the expressive conscious and unconscious cultures are mass communicated. No doubt, the mass media is one of the basic instruments through which these expressive cultures of social realities are passed to the public; and one of such instruments in the media is the newspaper. The newspaper has not only become an instrument of social reality but also secured a formidable space in the world of popular culture and humanities. In Nigeria, newspaper stands present a public space dominated by the proletarian class that is unable to afford newspapers daily. They congregate to read headlines, rent newspapers and debate current issues reported by the newspapers.

The first newspaper emerged in Germany in 1605 (Thompson 1995; Mirzoeff and Watson 2003), and since its emergence, newspapers have become important means of disseminating information of all kinds. Historically, in Nigeria, newspapers were first introduced in the 1850s and 1860s, as the diverse societies that would eventually make up Nigeria came under colonial rule (Lawuyi 1991; Adejunmobi 2002; Ambler 2002). The

principal aim of colonial masters then, was to disseminate its policies to the elite literate public who would further disseminate it to the illiterate natives. It effectively served the indirect rule system as newspapers became part of the paraphernalia of the elite class, which was admired by the underprivileged natives. Newspapers effectively served the purpose of westernizing the literate native as many Nigerian educated elite during this era craved for English newspapers to enhance their consciousness of Western values and culture. In the Nationalist era and at the verge of independence, some indigenous newspaper outfits emerged in Nigeria. The first was the *Nigeria Daily Times*, which emerged in the early 1920s. The 1950s and immediate post independent period (1960s) witnessed politically motivated newspapers, which reflected the political waves at that time. Some of the newspapers included the *West African Pilot*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Nigeria Outlook*, *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post*, *Daily Sketch* and *New* (Lawuyi 1991).

The culture of communicative flow through newspaper outlets, which was popularised among the literate-elite class has been diffused to the generality of the literate population over the years. Nevertheless, in as much as newspapers are vital for social consciousness, more often than not, the generality of the population in Nigeria are unable to afford newspapers daily. For example in Nigeria, the cost of a newspaper is almost up to and/or even higher than the daily income of about 70 percent of the population who live below US\$1.00 per day, depending on the brand of newspaper (United Nations Development Programme 2010).

Table 1 shows that newspapers cost between US\$0.80 and US\$1.60, which is a substantial fraction of the daily income of most Nigerians who earn low income. This may be one of the predisposing factors attracting readers to newspaper stands in Nigeria. Thus as rational beings, the readers opt for the alternative of coming to newspaper stands to gain access to information, which may engender meaningful social relations and social consciousness. Therefore, the study is aimed at understanding the conditions that attract respondents to newspaper stands and how newspaper stands impact social consciousness.

Table 1: The Cost of some National Dailies in Nigeria¹

Newspaper	Naira	US\$
<i>Guardian</i>	150 (200 on Weekends)	1.20 (1.60 on Weekends)
<i>Thisday</i>	150 (200 on Weekends)	1.20 (1.60 on Weekends)
<i>Punch</i>	100	0.80
<i>Vanguard</i>	100	0.80
<i>Tribune</i>	100	0.80
<i>Sun</i>	100	0.80
<i>Nation</i>	100	0.80

METHODOLOGY

The study has two objectives: (a) to explore the reasons that attract respondents to newspaper stands; (b) to understand how newspaper stands impact social consciousness.

¹ The prices of daily newspapers have since increased by 75 to 100 per cent between 2007 and 2010. Data for the table were sourced through the fieldwork that was carried out in 2007.

Qualitative data was collected for the study. The qualitative data were generated through non-participatory observation and oral interviews conducted with both readers and vendors in four major newspaper stands in Ibadan including Agodi-Gate, Total Garden, Agbowo and the University of Ibadan (UI). In all, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve (12) readers and four (4) newspaper vendors who were willing to participate in the study, while the data gathered were subjected to content analysis.

FINDINGS

Reasons that Attract Respondents to Newspaper Stands

Diverse reasons attract readers to newspaper stands. These range from financial incapability to the quest to read multiple newspapers and the need to have people to interact with among others. According to a participant:

"I come here periodically to read newspapers basically because of the economic situation in the country. I am no longer financially strong as I used to be. In the past, I used to buy many newspapers per day, but now, I do not have enough money to buy as many as I used to. By coming here, I could buy one or two newspapers, but I would still be able to read all others by paying just a token of N20.00 (US\$0.13), which I consider as reading many newspapers almost for free. Apart from that, you also relate with people. Many people here are enlightened, not only on papers, but sports, politics and other things. Secondly, gone are the days when there were constant electricity supply at homes, these days you cannot watch T.V. or listen to radio, due to erratic power supply, but if you come to the stand here you feel relieved and share your views and ideas with people who are enlightened, that is my reasons for coming here. "

(Reader/Total Garden/March 9 2007)

Judging from the responses, one could deduce that coming over to newspaper stands to read, affords readers cheap access to newspapers. Against the lowest cost of US\$0.80, which each reader has to pay for each newspaper purchased, he/she only pays US\$ 0.13 to 'rent' and have infinite access to the total collection of newspapers at the stand for as long as he/she remains at the stand. Likewise, the reader is also opportune to interact and exchange ideas with others from whom he may gain further elaboration about the news reported. Hence, issues spanning the whole spectrum of Nigerian affairs, including politics, economy, sports, religion, education, social unrest etc. become salient issues of discussion even as bonds of friendship and acquaintances develop from there. Hence, another research participant views newspaper stand apparently as an escape from family pressures,

"If you are at home, people will disturb you. Children will begin to cry for your attention, but here, there is no disturbance at all and there is time for pleasure. Hence, if I want to ease-off stress, I come here to joke, play and read newspapers."

(Reader/Total Garden/March 9 2007)

It seems that the reader 'escapes' to newspaper stands to avoid disturbance at home. This may not just be in terms of getting distracted from work due to noise or cries of young family members. He may actually opt to go to the newspaper stand in order to avoid being

pressurised to provide funds he may not have. Since he might not be able to stand the shame of being a financially incompetent parent, he goes to the newspaper stand, which also takes the form of a pleasure centre, where he may while-away the time with friends, acquaintances and even strangers, under the guise of coming around to read. For other participants still, the newspaper stand provides channels for exposure to local and international happenings, in terms of politics and even job openings. These are reflected in the interview data presented below. Hence, a reader stated:

Coming here makes one more exposed and knows what is going on both locally and internationally, and one derives pleasure also..."

(Reader/Agodi Gate/March 3 2007).

An interviewee who claims to be a politician indicated that he visits newspaper stands in order to access public opinions. *"I have benefited a lot. I am a politician. I come here to know what is going on in the political world and also in the course I learn how they play politics"* (Reader, a politician/Agbowo / March 22, 2007).

Visiting newspaper stands of course allows politicians and their agents some sort of information about the concern of the public which could be used as a campaign or propaganda strategy. It is likely that politicians in the opposition would readily visit newspaper stands a strategy for covertly attracting public sympathy for their political alignments. In addition, an interviewee disclosed that he visits newspaper stands in search of job adverts. He stated:

"Before now, I did not know that I could get job through newspapers. But when I started coming here, people began to teach and show me how to do it. I am also privileged to have met so many people here who are now my friends and they are helpful to me. It has also helped my intellectual growth, public speaking and even spoken English, I have benefited a lot."

(Reader/Agbowo /March 22 2007).

Many newspapers actually use job adverts as selling points. Most notable of these is the Guardian Newspaper. Its' Tuesday and Thursday editions usually contain large number of job advertisements. It is quite commonplace to find many young unemployed people who have acquired some forms of higher trainings and certificates clustering around newspaper stands to access Guardian newspaper for possible adverts.

It is important to note that newspaper vendors readily welcome readers at their stands. A vendor claims:

"So many of them are my friends and that is why they cannot chase me away from here. They come here to buy newspapers, discuss and we are in the same reader's club. When they come together as readers club members, they attend to their social needs as well..."

(Vendor/ UI/April 22 2007).

This claim is substantiated by another vendor:

"People visit newspaper stands to access news almost free of charge, interact with other readers, make new friends and discuss current issues. It is noteworthy to state that news readers often support the ideas presented by journalists in the newspapers. More often than not, the ideas presented reflect the position of certain interest classes who are owners of newspaper outfits. Hence, whereas a reader may be out at the newspaper stand to

access news cheaply, he is also thus subject to the ideological disposition of the elite class contesting for a place within the consciousness of the people who have shared interest in the public space."

(Vendor/Total Garden/April 11 2007).

It is widely accepted that man is a social being and the urge to get informed about the social environment is germane to survival. Most times, where information is given free or at a cost that is as good as free, people are attracted to such points. One of these points is the newspaper stand. This is evident from the qualitative data got through interviews and observations made in newspaper stands visited. For instance at the main newspaper stand at the University of Ibadan while collecting data on March 24 2007, a relatively old man talked about President Olusegun Obasanjo's supposed investiture of Alhaji Umaru Musa Yaradua as Nigeria's likely puppet president, having been supposedly imposed as the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Presidential Candidate². Yaradua was presented as a sickly candidate whose health might further deteriorate because of the pressures of the Office of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The issue he discussed attracted the rapt attention of a considerably large crowd, some of whom attempted to make their own contributions. Immediately he finished, somebody else who felt concerned about the possible continued ruling of Obasanjo from his Ota farm shouted: "no, another candidate will emerge, *ko si oun ti Olorun ko le se*" (there is nothing God cannot do)." As he was about to round up his point, a slim younger man, fair in complexion with a pair of glasses came into the discussion and shifted it to a story on Vice President Atiku and why he should not contest because of corruption charges, and as he pushed his point other issues came up and in a twinkle of an eye, the gathering split into two groups, each discussing issues that interested them. A lot about Nigeria's socio-political history were brought to fore, as cases were discussed about what had happened in Nigeria from the period of the nationalists such as Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello up to Obasanjo's rule as a military dictator and a civilian 'autocratic' president.

Thus in corroboration of the assertion above, another interview participant opined,
"There is no limitation to what we discuss. It is a place where you get information free, but people here are enlightened, when you argue, you must buttress your points with facts. You cannot say just anything, you will be mocked and cautioned while some well informed people will not only correct you but take you to history buttressed with fact and you will get to know so many things even from the history and facts that would be presented."

(Reader/Total Garden/March 9 2007).

This is also similar to another response, "

...here, you hear about who is who even people who cannot read newspapers will cluster around to discuss and you will hear history of 1914 up to the present period. You will be told what you have never heard in your life. You will not only be surprised but relieved and happy..."

(Reader/UI/April 3 2007).

² Alhaji Umaru Musa Yaradua won the 2007 presidential election and he was sworn in as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on 27 May 2007. He died on 5th May 2010. Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, the Vice President and one of Chief Obasanjo's supposed loyalists was subsequently sworn in as President.

Likewise, another interviewee stated,

"...as the issue get hotter, everyone takes sides. Some will defend, some will oppose, there can be four to five groups or more discussing different issues and you are free to join any group or leave one for another. They say anything and there is no information you cannot access."

(Vendor /Agodi-Gate/March 3 2007)

Newspaper stands allow free flow of information. Readers are free to discuss and make contributions as much as they believe they know, while those that are adjudged to be false are discountenanced by those who may be more vocal and believe they have the correct information. However, it is pertinent to note that on the one hand as much as the issues that may be discussed may evolve out of stories reported in newspapers; those commenting may add their own views which may be valid, on the other hand, false. From such, rumours which may be taken as absolute truth may emerge, even as listeners may be misinformed about social realities. Nevertheless, whether the views presented by readers are valid or not, an important aspect of social relations at newspaper stands is the social construction of consciousness as the findings from the second research objective shows in the next section.

Newspapers Stands and Social Consciousness

One of the qualities of the mass media and in particular, newspapers is the potential of enhancing social consciousness through the process of socialization. Social scientists recognise the mass media as one of the agents of socialization. What makes the case in point quite unique is that the target audience do not seemingly have direct access to newspapers as they can hardly afford it. Since going to hang around newspaper stands, to read, has come as an alternative, both the access they therefore have to newspapers and through this means as well as the discussions of congregations at the stands somewhat contributes to social consciousness of readers. This is because, through the interactions that take place readers gain interpretive understanding of their socio-cultural and political environments. Thus a reader posited,

"It has effect on the social consciousness of both the literate and non-literate. By the time we leave here and get home, people will ask us what is in paper today and what we discussed, so the information we get here, we will take it home and give them, and it will affect how their own opinion will be formed too."

(Reader/Total Garden/March 3 2007)

Judging from the remarks above, one could deduce that readers, who come over to newspaper stands to read, discuss and listen to discussion, convey the information they have received to people within their immediate social environment who might not be privileged to have direct access to the news that may come out of newspaper stands. They therefore serve as a link between the 'uninformed' and the news reported. As they therefore convey the information they have received, it is pertinent to note that, the information conveyed may not be exactly as reported in newspapers. There would be some true or false additions that might have been received from ensuing discussions. The totality of these therefore, gets configured into what is conveyed, which to a large extent may also inform people's social consciousness.

Thus, a reader gave an example of how opinions are formed about political matters even at newspaper stands,

"The discussion that happens here goes a long way at influencing people's opinions. For example, even though people may have made up their minds

on who to vote and not to vote for, their opinions may however be swayed through the discussions we have at roadside newspaper stands. What happens here is like a people's verdict, deriving from roadside court. Once matters have been concluded in roadside courts like this, you will see people going around to spread the message and even somewhat campaign for politicians who have not employed them. Thus, someone will hear something here and go to another roadside court to tell the story and so you can see, if 100 people got the idea and accept it, they will multiply its spread. In short, what happens here has serious effect on how people form their ideas in the society."

(Reader/Agbowo/March 22 2007).

For another study participant, it is a means of status enhancement. He extracts valuable information and delivers it to others as valuable news for social valuation and respect. The participant stated,

"...It also has effect on my own social status too as it increases my popularity and social honour. I work in the suburbs, where not many people have access to up-to-date news. Hence, what I get here, I tell them and my fame spreads around".

(Reader/Total Garden/March 9 2007).

For as much as newspaper stands may enhance people's consciousness and perceived statuses as the data above have shown, it is important to also note that the conclusions reached at 'roadside courts' hardly influences government decisions. Thus a reader posited:

"When an issue is new, hot and reported in the newspapers, you will see people gathering around to read and discuss it. This will help one to form his opinion about it. However the fact remains that we gather just to read, hear and discuss what is happening, irrespective of what our conscience says, we may not sway government decision. But at least we have a place to go to relay our minds..."

(Reader/Agbowo/March 22 2007).

Similarly, another reader indicated,

"Let me tell you, our discussions do not have any effect on government decisions. We come here to say what ought to be, it does not get to the government. Though at times especially during elections, some political parties do send spies to listen to what we say about them and this they use to form their campaign strategy."

(Reader /UI/March 22 2007)

As much as newspaper stands serve as centres of social consciousness, the conclusions that are made have little effect on government policy. On the other hand, the issues reported generate discourses which impact on social consciousness. From newspaper stands, readers consciously and unconsciously disseminate ideas and ideologies that are propagated by the bourgeois class to either advance or discredit certain interests. The social relations of newspaper stands do not serve feedback purposes to the political and economic elites, but it conveys the policies and interests of the elite class to the proletarian class who construct consciousness out of the propagated ideas as shared interests in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This paper observed that newspaper stands provides readers an avenue to interact and create meaningful values which engender social consciousness. It is indeed an alternative avenue, which has come forth due to the deplorable socio-economic conditions in the country. As readers find it difficult to afford the purchase of newspapers daily, they opt for the alternative of renting at a minimal cost in order to gain access to current news reported in newspapers. However, as they gather around the stands, they receive information put together by the elite class. The information received represents the views of the bourgeois class. The news read are discussed among co-readers and bystanders at newspaper stands. The totality of the discourses and conclusions go a long way at constructing the consciousness that is adopted and also diffused to other members of the society. By and large, however, the ideas of the bourgeois class who control the newspaper outfits prevail as they successfully transmit their views and interests reported in newspapers to the proletarian public who are desirous of current news at minimal or no cost.

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