

GOVERNMENT OWNED NEWSPAPERS: THE PASSING OF THE 'TRUSTEESHIP MODEL'

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Abstract

This article examines government ownership of newspapers based on the trusteeship model, which had been dominant since independence and whose influence peaked in the 1970s. The article observes that the political ideology on which these newspapers were established has become obsolete, hence the newspapers have outlived their usefulness and are, in the least, unprofitable even to their owners. It concludes that state newspapers are now on the path of extinction whose passage, none and nothing can prevent.

Growth of State Newspapers

Before independence, majority of newspapers were owned and controlled by the nationalists and their political parties. Individual newspaper chains preceded formal establishment of state newspapers, and developed in support of regional governments. Each region had a dominant political party and loyal chain of newspapers. Political partisanship by newspapers was particularly manifest in the Western and Eastern regions. In the West, late Chief Obafemi Awolowo dominated regional politics with his party, the Action Group and his Newspaper chain. In the East, late Dr. Nnandi Azikiwe's National Council for Nigeria and the Camerouns, NCNC, ruled with the support of Associated Newspapers of Nigeria Limited. Each of the chains had more than five titles from its stable spread across the country.

Each newspaper chain existed to promote respective regional party aspirations and to challenge rival regions and their political parties. The Western and Eastern newspapers developed into fierce regional

newspapers. Regionalisation of newspapers reflected the ethnic origins of their founders, their interests, and their political party ideologies. Newspapers became partisan in content and outlook and came short of promotion of national goals. Editorial content and activities were prompted and directed by who funded them, his ethnic origin and interest, his region and political affiliation, and the subtle religious influence prevailing.

Reaction of Northern Region to regionalisation of newspapers in the West and East was the establishment of a full-pledged government newspaper. The North began the first generation of government owned newspapers with establishment of *Gaskiya Ta fi Kwabo* in 1939 and the *Nigerian Citizen* in 1948. The latter metamorphosed into the *New Nigerian* in 1966. The Northern regional government founded its newspaper with objective to put across the voice of its elite, to mobilise them to achieve set goals, and to fight the Northern cause in all disputes at the centre. According to Sharp in Kuka (1993:67-68), the

creation of the New Nigerian was a political act... regional government of Northern Nigeria was aware it was losing a propaganda war in Nigeria... they lacked the means to communicate their political philosophy....

The Eastern Regional government followed the Northern Region example to strengthen Azikiwe's newspaper group with establishment of government owned *Eastern Outlook* in 1949. In 1955, it changed its name to Nigerian Outlook, It was renamed Biafran Sun during the Civil War. After the war, it resurfaced as the Renaissance and later as the *Daily Star*. At independence the Federal and Western regional governments completed the full circle of first generation state newspapers. The federal government established the *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post* at its official newspapers after independence in March 1961. In the face of increasing regionalisation of newspapers, the federal government saw the need to own its newspapers to promote national policies and programmes. The Western regional government established the *Daily Sketch* and *Sunday Sketch* in 1964.

Creation of 12 states out of the regional structure, meant to contain the inevitable civil war brought the second generation of state owned newspapers. Each state realised the need to establish its own newspaper.

Mid-Western State established the *Nigerian Observer*, Kwara State *The Herald*, Lagos State, *The Horizon*, South Eastern State, *The Nigerian Chronicle*, Benue Plateau State *The Nigerian Standard* and Rivers State, *Nigerian Tide*. Each of these newspapers published two or more titles and together, they dominated and outnumbered private newspapers during and after the civil war. Though government owned, these newspapers remained critical of the General Gowon administration and were bold enough to denounce corruption and waste in government, and other sundry issues.

Creation of states influenced the growth of Government-owned newspapers. In 1976, the Federal Military government created nine additional states and these new states started what could be regarded as third generation of state newspapers. Benue State established the *Nigeria Voice*, Imo State *The Statesman*, Kano State *The Triumph*, Sokoto State *The Path*, Niger State *Newslines* and *The Trumpeter* in Bauchi State. The Federal Government increased the tally in 1975, by forceful acquisition of 60 per cent controlling shares in the *Daily Times*, and by complete take over of the *New Nigerian* from its owners, the Northern States. The Federal government said it was not competing with private initiatives but to providing a channel of communication with Nigerians and to expanding the activities, particularly of the *New Nigerian*, to cover all parts of the country. The federal government felt increasingly dissatisfied that the regional newspapers were not representing adequately its views on major issues. But whether the acquisition and takeover were done to foster national unity or to remove the influence of the newspapers, the fact remains that the editorial policy of the two newspapers changed to reflect the views of its new ownership. The takeover was merely an ownership change from government to government and an action taken in terms of the political expediency of the time.

Subsequent increases in the number of states, first to 21 states and now to 36 states have established two more generations of state newspapers. Later states such as Abia has the *Daily Nation*, Delta State published *The Pointer*, Kogi State has *The Graphic*, Ondo State has *The Hope* and Akwa Ibom State *The Pioneer*, Abia State *Nigerian Ambassador* and Anambra's *National Light*.

Management and Control of State Newspapers

Administration of government newspapers has always been based on what Meomeka A. in Adaba, T. O. (1996:12) describes as the 'Trusteeship Model' "predicated on the principles of public interest, convenience and necessity, where it was ward of state authorities...". Dominant here is the school of thought that, given the financial constraints on newspaper production, governments in a developing country such as Nigeria, have an important role to play in the dissemination of information about official policies, programmes of enlightenment and education of the people. According to Edeani in Ugboajah (1985:48), the main justification had been that

since the political party press and the private commercial press are not adequately and responsibly publishing government policies, programmes, activities, and so on. It is necessary to establish government media to do the job.

The underlying principle is that government has the responsibility to serve and protect the public interest through its media. Government believes its failure to participate in newspaper publishing "would mean handing over the thinking of the people, formation of public opinion, and direction of public rule to a few people who may have the means and leisure to print newspapers (Edeani, D. in Ugboajah, F. (1985:48).

Trusteeship Model emphasises public interest by paternalistic or absolute government ownership. Here, government exercises routine control over administrative and editorial management of the newspapers. Typically, government establishes "means of internal control, often by placing trusted and loyal persons in 'gate-keeping' positions to ensure that materials broadcast or published do not put the government in bad light" (Nwankwo, C. *et al*, 1993:5). In government owned newspapers generally, journalists are expected to reflect the government position in their reports. The unwritten injunction for journalists in government owned media has been 'to see everything good in the government and nothing bad'.

Under the trusteeship model, major premise is that state newspapers are traditional organs of their governments. And without exception, Dare (2000:18) says government newspapers became "party organs

financed by the public transforming opponents of party into opponents of government and equating dissents with disloyalty". Even before independence the politicians that established newspapers used them to protect self and party interests, and to attack one another's interests. According to Oseni (2003:69-73), the *West African Pilot*, after its establishment "soon became a platform for party politics as it sought to defend Zik's political interests and particularly the interest of the NCNC... (and) soon introduced a competition, along political and ethnic lines". In Western Region, the *Nigerian Tribune* and *Daily Express* championed the cause of late Chief Obafemi Awolowo who was in opposition and that of his party the Action Group. The Northern Region "established the *Nigerian Citizen* in 1948 to protect its own religious, cultural and political interests that were in rivalry with that of the other regions" (Nwankwo, et al, 1993:19)

At independence the Federal Government established, the *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post*, Odofia (1991:162) reports, "not only to attack the nationalistic, and the relatively objective *Daily Times* but also to protect and enhance the interest of Northern Nigeria". At regional level, the Akintola government set up *Daily Sketch* to defend his own image and to fight the Enugu based *Nigerian Outlook*. The newspapers became deeply polarised along party lines and ethnic interests which cleaved into a three regional form. Because the regional cleavages assumed greater official positions after independence, governments newspapers promoted the personal and sectional interests of political leaders other than the national interests. When their role as solemn harps of sectional integration became pronounced, Dare, O (2000:18-19) says, government newspapers "operated primarily to strengthen the grip of the regional leaders over their followers and... the fragmentation of the country".

Ethno-regional religious and political rivalries overwhelmed first republic politics. Disputes over 1963 census and 1964 election results soon led to riots and crisis which culminated in the first coup d'etat and counter coup on January 15, 1966. In the events leading up to the civil war, newspapers took sides with their respective governments and press coverage of events leading to the civil war never conveyed the depth of widespread unrest in Northern Nigeria, the depth of resentment against Ironsi's regime "(Chick J. D. in Dare, O. 2000:23), and the scale and savagery of the massacre of the Igbos residing in Northern

Nigeria". Uche (1989:30) observes that "even the federal government *Morning Post* never saw anything wrong with any policy of its owners". It failed to understand that it was nationally oriented and must maintain the truth in news content especially on sensitive and controversial issues in which the nation faced crisis of identity and legitimacy.

In the period preceding the civil war, and more than a decade after the war, majority of newspapers were government owned. During the war they towed the official line to 'keep Nigeria one' as a 'task that must be done'. After the war under the military, Ugboajah, (1985:230-31) maintains that "except for the New Nigeria, there was a general tendency for government newspapers to take neutral positions on conflict issues". He is quick to explain however that neutrality here "connotes the choice of middle ground and does not necessarily mean avoidance of anti-government predispositions", and that,

such a neutral position peculiar to government newspapers in their editorial stand on conflict issues should only be viewed as the safety valve of a cautious editor under duress (real or imaginary) of a military regime.

New Nigerian led all other newspapers in anti-government editorials and stance on issues (Edeani in Ugboajah, 1985:48) says the *New Nigerian* was never "pro-government and was neutral only once. It was the only newspaper that was against the government stand on the public execution of armed robbers". Indeed, both "the *New Nigerian* and *Daily Times* exercised a high degree of independence not normally associated with military regimes" (Haruna, M. in Uyo, A and Dare, O. 1996:64). The newspapers, though largely government owned, remained critical and outspoken even on sensitive issues of national development. Newspapers criticised the General Gowon administration and denounced corruption and waste in government and sundry issues including the handling of the 1973 census, creation of states, revenue allocation, the drafting of a new constitution and the restoration of democratic rule.

But government soon equated press campaigns against corruption and mismanagement as "incitements of sectional interest and undermining of national interest, peace and security", and warned of "drastic and unpleasant measures to curb press excesses" (Uche,

1989:30). The military developed an attitude of breathing down the neck of editors, making phone calls to dictate editorial matters” which “was stiffing enough to force Peter Enahoro, editor-in-chief of *Daily Times* to go into exile”(Constitutional Rights Project, 1993:24).

The 1970s marked the highest point of success of state owned newspapers which were in the majority. The only private newspapers that survived to witness the Second Republic were *The punch* and *Nigerian Tribune*. *The West African Pilot* ceased publication in 1978 and the Daily Service saw this editorial independence reduced considerably at *New Nigerian*. At *Daily Times* in virtually disappeared”. The Federal Government controlled *Daily Times* and *New Nigeria*, became, more or less the organs of the ruling NPN. Under the Shagari government, the refusal of the federal government to reflect opposition views on its media led to proliferation of state media in states controlled by opposition parties and “the private press was not left out as the political interests of the owners reflected overtly no their publications. Government newspapers became organs of political parties in power and with the political press “espoused the public interest only in so far as it coincided with the interest of their proprietors” (Agbaje in Dare, 2000:29). Instead of serving the people, state newspapers operated merely as propaganda machinery in service of governments. They became highly partisan and lacked balance in editorial content and good management.

Government interference in the content of its newspapers was most times in form of post publication censorship, which had obvious consequences on the fortunes of state newspapers. Government newspapers perished after the act of publication to stifle independent points of view opposite to government policies and interests. Government at all times sought to control information on specific issues and events or steer the course of public discourse on them or gain favourable coverage. On July 31, 1987 the *New Nigerian* published a story that Maryam Babangida travelled to Saudi Arabia for the lesser Hajj with one hundred people on her encourage. Government denied the story the following day. Security agents arrested Innocent Okparadike, the then editor, and detained him. The writer of the story, then on same lesser Haji was also arrested and detained on return. The *New Nigerian* “later apologised to the president’s wife and declared the story” (*Newswatch*, September 14, 1987:13).

One month after this incident, the *New Nigerian* wrote an editorial criticising government trial of detained seven former civilian governors. The editorial indicated there was

glaring lopsidedness in the trials which have so far shown a curious pre-occupation with state governors. Conversely, there is a noticeable sluggishness, not to say hesitation in the trial of individuals who had similar positions federal level as ministers, advisers, presidential liaison officers and chief executives of federal parastatals. (*Newswatch*, September 14, 1987:15).

The editor who replaced Okparadike was again harassed, arrested and detained.

What happened in Plateau and Oyo States in the middle of August of June 1987 shows the extent to which government went to punish its newspapers after publishing stories on controversial issues. In Oyo State the government owned *Daily Sketch* published an editorial which berated the federal government over the compulsory retirement of Oladele Olashore, Managing Director, First Bank, and Ibrahim Ayagi, Managing Director of Continental Merchant Bank. The editorial said government must not create the impression of “muffling the voice of dissent within our system” and of “discouraging others from expressing honest views and giving advice when it is most needed” (Ibid:14), if the retirement of the two bankers was as a result of their criticisms of government policies. The government of Oyo State summoned Managing Director, General Manager and Editors of *Sketch Newspapers* to retrieve from circulation all copies of the August 16th 1987 edition of the *Sunday Sketch* which contained the offending editorial” (Amnesty International Report, 1990:180). In the Plateau State-owned *Nigerian Standard*, a similar editorial on same issue said

By retiring Ayagi and Olashore, the federal government has only succeeded in giving the dangerous and unfortunate impression that it is more disposed toward mediocre and sycophants who are the real enemies of the government and people of Nigeria (*Nigerian Standard* Editorial August 18, 1987).

Plateau State government promptly sacked the editors saying his comments and publications on issues had been consistently at variance with the posture of government.

One curious case of obsequiousness made the military government so embarrassed that it had to remove Sidi Ali Sirajo as managing director of the *New Nigerian* newspapers, to reorganise the company administratively and editorially and restore discipline, proficiency, professionalism, public accountability” (*Newswatch*, August 6, 1990:38) in the newspapers organisation. In his desire and determination to support the policies and programmes of the General Babangida administration, particularly the transition programme, Sidi Ali Sirajo usurped editorial functions from editors and censored every editorial matter that went into the paper, including lead stories, editorials, letters to the editor and personal columns. As he replaced editorial matters of will, and compromised professionalism with loyalty, there developed an impasse between him and the editors and the credibility of the newspaper waned considerably. His persistent sycophancy got military authorities so embarrassed that top military officers, according to *Newswatch* (August 6, 1990:46), advised him to “slow down on his praise-singing and back off from attacking people who criticised government”. He was finally sacked.

Government agencies connected with management of state newspapers randomly interfered in the management of these newspapers. A good example of such interference is case of intimidation of Tony Ekekanam as, editor of *Nigerian Observer* of former Bendel State by government board of directors of the company. The Board removed him as editor on September 23, 1991 for allegedly using the wrong picture Maryam Babangida. The board said the picture was wrong because the first lady appeared “pensive and unglamorous” (*The Punch*, September 24, 1991. p.1).

The sacking of *Daily Times* managing director, Yomi Ogunbiyi in December, 1991, shows how public officials also routinely interfered with editorial and administrative functions of state newspapers, in order to please the government of the day. Minister of information, Alex Akinyele sought and removed the MD for allowing publication of certain stories the minister considered unfavourably and unpleasant, and for making certain administrative changes. The first story was a December 31 report of views of Wole Soyinka on government elections which he

described as a “Sham”, and the second, a December 26 front page story titled “Government may review open ballot system”, in which, the minister was quoted as describing the system as “unsophisticated and too prone to rigging” (*Newswatch* January 13, 1992:44). The minister denied the report and forced the newspaper to retract the story. He also reversed the administrative changes.

Post publication censorship by government was sometimes prompted by an advertisement. Following the spate of religious riots by Muslim groups in the North in 1987, a council of Ullama published an advertisement in the *New Nigerian* which enjoined Muslims to take steps to protect themselves saying “the government and security agents including the armed forces had failed to protect them as citizens of Nigeria” (*Newswatch* September 14, 1987:13). Government arrested the managing director of the newspaper and detained him for allowing the publication of the advertisement. It follows that government even dictated what advertisement its newspaper can accept or reject. This had tremendous economic consequences on these newspapers.

Government control of its newspapers is legitimised by tying the welfare of journalists in state employ to civil service conditions of self actualisation. In this regard, government ownership has an inverse effect of self censorship as a survival strategy among journalists in the state newspapers. The tendency of government newspapers to deliberately play down some stories make it impossible for them to compete with private newspapers in open market with success. Without good editorial content, good management and aggressive marketing strategies, the fortunes of government newspapers dwindled steadily, as they suffered from poor patronage. Their credibility and influence also waned over the years, and the newspapers have now become less profitable even to their owners. The federal government’s *Morning Post* and *Sunday Post* became defunct early 1973, because the audience revolted against reading government press releases and bulletins. Today government newspapers are in parlous state and at various stages of transition.

The Last Rites

Three years after the closure of Sketch Press Limited, publishers of *Daily Sketch*, *Sunday Sketch*, and *Gbougoun*, the five South Western owner governors are still agreeing “to contribute money and

pay the outstanding salaries and allowances of workers” (*The Guardian* December, 22 2003: 6), and return the company’s titles to the news stand. Owner governors reviewed its fate three months after closure and engaged an auditing consultant “to assess assets and liabilities of the company...inform level of financial assistance necessary to put the titles back on news stands” (*The Punch* March 20, 2002:3). On December 31, 2001, the five owner states governors dissolved management of Sketch Press Limited and closed the company for what Alade K. in *The Guardian* (January 14, 2002:65) describes as its “deleterious and precarious situation”.

The government newspaper entered this state from decades of mismanagement and neglect which caused the declining efficiency of equipment, and editorial operational problems. These placed heavy financial constraints on the company which became manifest in backlog of salaries and allowances, gratuities and final entitlements, and huge debts to suppliers and contractors. The Sketch company experienced long periods of industrial disharmony and production became poor in quality and epileptic. Workers continually expressed collective disappointment in the way and manner management run the newspapers and embarked on constant strikes. Their last strike put the newspaper off newsstands for five months. Long periods off the newsstands have contributed to loss of money and became counter productive even in state newspapers other than *The Sketch*. Creditors preyed on the company and “impound or confiscate some of its properties through legal judgements” (*The Guardian* January 14, 2002:65).

Both government and management neglect the company and its workers. Workers are neglected in training and education, and in their conditions of service which most of them are never aware of. In the year 2000, management of Sketch newspapers sacked workers to reduce huge wage bills but the retrenched workers never got their entitlements including cooperative savings (NSITF and FHSF) deducted from their salaries. Government only promised them and owner states made management and board changes and also promised a ₦48 million lifeline. But the lifeline came and *The Sketch* could not overcome its too numerous problems.

Delivery services and available facilities have become obsolete and inadequate. The company now needs much money to resuscitate obsolete equipment, computers, lithographic cameras, date burners,

printing machines. Deplorable condition of equipment require huge amount of money. Where efforts have been made to resuscitate the company, such were marred by lack of focus and pattern in editorial content and positioning of the newspaper. Apparently, the government newspaper, as Oduwole B. in (*The Guardian* May, 17, 1999) says, has “not been oriented in such a manner as to make it productive”. Even the commercial printing press arm of the sketch Newspapers limited has died. The newspaper is dying and surely, its tomb shall bear an epitaph by its owners: “*The Sketch* is a legacy of Odua and none of the present states governors wants the company to die” (*The Punch* March 20th 2002:3).

The Kwara State government owned *The Herald*, established in 1973, fell from daily production capacity to bi-weekly under successive military rule in the state. Its closure in 1994 for two and half years virtually killed the newspaper. Its parent company, Kwara State Printing and Publishing Company also stopped its commercial printing services. *The Herald* was returned to the news stand on March 9, 1997 by consultancy firm, but first as a weekly. Under the consultancy, the newspaper published bi-weekly for the first four months to test ground of acceptance for possible daily production.

The consultancy firm that revived it faced the usual problems of circulation, staff, equipment, government policy and editorial policy, finance. The Newspaper had 16 broken down circulation vehicles, no editorial staff including reporters and sub-editors, obsolete printing equipment. Four months after the consultancy took over government was still promising installation of the Gross Urbanites Printing Machine meant to improve its production. Because of obsolete machines, the consultancy printed *The Herald* outside the house. Workers enslaved by the civil service structure, are still hoping for a competitive take home.

Under the consultancy, government maintained a policy of non-interference, editorially and commercially and *The Herald* was able to “circulate about 20, 000 copies weekly” (*The Guardian* July 14, 1997:45). The consultancy reorganised the newspaper editorially, creating departments complete with field staff. It improved the newspaper’s layout and design, changed its motto and experimented with colour on the front and back pages. The firm planned for regional offices not only to improve circulation but “to transform the Newspaper from

‘national’ to regional coverage of the middle belt”. Under its management, the consultancy sought divorce of the newspaper’s dependence on government for subvention, and advocated for semi-privatisation of the company. It proposed a Board of Directors to make the newspaper profit oriented and without support of government subvention.

Most of these plans were never realised. Perhaps there is hope for *The Herald*. Abiodun Fagbemi in *The Guardian* (April 23, 2001:77) writes that a project “to relocate *The Herald* to its permanent site is near completion” by the new civilian government in Kwara State which has already mounted multi-million naira printing machines.

At *The Voice*, a third generation state owned newspaper, established in 1980, continued government interference in editorial policy and management under successive military governments turned it from a public liability company into a government parastatal. Without advertisement to sustain its limited liability status, and years of neglect by past military rule in the state, the newspaper stopped publication for three years. It published “only few copies of its Sunday edition periodically for government house and ministry officials (*Newswatch*, October 21, 1996:28-29).

With low staff strength, leaking roofs and printing machines left idle for over three years, the military that sought to reactivate the newspaper in 1996 needed about N15 million. The newspaper also needed N3 million to pay for the cumulative court judgements against it. Over the years, successive efforts made changes in the newspaper’s masthead and motto, and experimented with colour, but neither has its editorial content changed nor the fortunes of the newspaper. Several attempts to publish bi-weekly failed as well as attempts to publish weekly. The newspaper is now moribund. Its commercial printing press, BPPCL now offers workers daily bread underground dealings. Management of the newspaper has been characterised by fraud. A former sub-editor with the company allegedly defrauded the company of nearly N300,000 and was sacked.

State newspapers are overall, characterised with maladministration and fraudulent activities. In the Cross River State Newspaper Corporation, publishers *The Chronicle* Group of newspapers in 1997. Heyford (1997:16-19) reports that in 1997, petitions against the general manager alleged “singular and individual over zealousness and fraudulent

mischievous and “ regarding the various printing jobs and advertisement from the state government amounting to over one million... as ‘personal windfalls’”. Workers accused the general manager of not paying their leave entitlements for five years, of sweeping their medical bills and transport claims under the carpet, of inflating grossly, the monthly wage bill, and of collecting various sums of money ranging from between N30,000 –N100,000 as travelling allowances without making such trips. Petitions also accused the general manager of usurping the functions of the advert manager, marketing and purchasing manager, resulting in the epileptic publication of the newspapers.

The general manager, characteristically denied all these allegations of fraud financial misappropriation and maladministration, and the government response to the crisis was to set up a panel. Since the establishment of the newspaper company, five different such panels had been constituted by various administrations in the state on same problem of financial recklessness yet none of their reports had been implemented. These, and similar other problems, never become public knowledge easily but are common with all the state owned newspapers.

While we accept that one of the major problems of state newspapers is managerial, inadequate government funding remains the fundamental problem that is fast killing government newspapers. Government negligence is partly responsible for the plundering of these companies. At Imo Newspapers, publishers of *The Statesman*, negligence over the years included non-payment of workers salaries and allowances for months. For more than one year no funds were made available for the production of the newspaper. Comfort Obi in *The Source* (August 11, 1997) writes that even “when we manage to publish... both the front and back page are filled with features and unimportant forthcoming stories of government official”. Long periods of idleness damage printing machines and other equipment which require huge sums of money for refurbishment. Government neglect and interference hardly demonstrates that the newspaper is a workable business.

In the first quarter of 1995, the Federal government sacked management of New Nigerian Newspapers (NNN) over “allegations of embezzlement of funds” (*Newswatch* March 6 1995:33). Government action was toward resuscitation of the NNN, which had suspended production for more than a month. Before suspension, the print run of the *New Nigerian* and *Sunday New Nigerian* had drastically fallen

from nearly 50,000 to 250 copies, and its distribution was limited to the presidency and other government offices. Circulation crashed because the newspapers were viewed as government mouth piece. Major problems of the company remain money to refurbish obsolete machines, and printing press, procurement of production materials, and settlement of a debt of more than N23 million naira. The bad state of the company's equipment also include circulation vehicles.

The company's workers salaries have also been many months in arrears. In September 1994, the company retrenched about 100 of its workers in Kaduna, closed it is Lagos offices, and sent about 200 other workers on compulsory leave without pay. At the time the newspaper suspended production, the company needed about N365 million to bring the paper back to life. Promises the Federal government made to the company a year before never materialised. Government was reluctant in giving fresh grants to the company because "money released to the company in the past was not well utilized", and also that, "the company had become a drain pipe while it continues to ask for more funds" (*Newswatch* March 6, 1995:33).

Bad management may have stalled production of the newspaper but government meddlesomeness in editorial content added credibility problems for the newspaper. According to Abdullazeez in *Newswatch* (March 6, 1995:33), "the chairman and chief executive of the company was in the habit of faxing ghost stories, editorials, features and advertisements" for use in the newspaper, some of which "were usually inciting and capable of leading to the disintegration of Nigeria."

Many have blamed the problems of the NNN "on the culture and religion in the North which do not favour activist journalism" (*Newswatch* March 6, 1995:33). But, Turi Mallam in Haruna M. (*Daily Trust* January 24, 2001:23) says "the decline of the NN can be traced to the decision by Babangida to bring in a rank outsider to edit the paper in 1985 and another rank outsider, Sidi Sirajo, to manage it". For Haruna Mohammed, however, "the decline started earlier from 1980 when the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) started meddling with the running of Federal Government Newspapers, the New Nigerian and the *Daily Times*" and "the way leadership of the media houses meekly submitted to it" (*Daily Trust* January 24, 2001:23).

The worst victims of mismanagement at the NNN are the workers. Management has neglected the plight of workers in the company, who

now allege they are working under perceived slavery conditions in the organisation” (*The Guardian* March 5, 2001:50). In 2001, management placed all the workers on probation for almost a year and without paying them four months salary arrears from 1999, including the year’s leave allowances of both working and retired workers. Saxone Achaine in the *Guardian* (March 5, 2001:50) writes the workers union “understands the insensitive attitude of the managing director... to the plight of workers, that he is only bothered about satisfying the federal authorities”. The workers believe that the unholy and inhuman treatment they are receiving arises from the politisation of the media organisation in the name of ‘privatisation’.

The 19 Northern States’ governors, the supposed owners of the 38 year-old company, are opposed to federal government’s privatisation plans. They prefer that ownership of the newspaper company be reverted to them. Their argument is that

since the newspaper was established solely to project and protect the interest of the North and was owned by the North before the takeover by the federal government, it should be returned to its original owners now that the federal government intends to hands off its management (*The Guardian*, March 12, 2001:62).

The federal government has accepted to “take into consideration the interest of the North” (*The Guardian* Feb. 24 2003) in the privatisation exercise. But the non-conclusion of the privatisation exercise of the company has worsened the plight of its workers who now engage management at every opportunity over non payment of their outstanding entitlements.

At the *Daily Times* plc, long standing problems are deep rooted. Its problems started when its management lost out to federal government acquisition in the third change of ownership of the company in 1975. The federal government acquired 60 percent controlling shares in the company. These equity shares are held by National Insurance Corporation of Nigeria, NICON. Government left the remaining 40 percent of shares to private investors of which 80 percent were DTN staff. With this take over, the federal government, rather than the Board of Directors came to take charge of matters of staff appointment, promotion and discipline and general policy and administration of the

company. At the time the federal government forcibly took over the *Daily Times* in 1975, the newspaper was a widely acknowledged success in Nigeria and Africa. *The Daily Times* was, as Oseni Tunji in (*ThisDay* January 30, 1999:17) writes, "the first indigenous company to be quoted on the Nigerian Stock Exchange".

But after the take over, the once reputed DTN became government tool for the various government agencies and functionaries to manipulate, use and dump. The cumulative effect of high-handedness of government in the affairs of DTN helped to wreck this once flourishing enterprise. In November 1997, Peter Enahoro, who headed its management as sole administrator wrote that

virtually all his predecessors as managing directors, warned government that flow of editorial policy instructions from Federal Ministry of Information, the tendency by some ministers to direct the contents of DTN newspapers, and displays of personal involvement in matters of management would erode pre-eminent position of the DTN. (*Vanguard* April 29, 1999:15).

Government never heeded the warning. Indeed, as the newspaper became too much of government mouth piece, it lost credibility with corresponding loss of circulation. And as the suspicion by readers that DTN reporting and editorial columns are brazen government propaganda ran deep, advertisers also deserted it. Government meddling in the company since 1976 made it even more difficult for the newspaper to retain good professionals.

Before Enahoro's arrival, the company was weighed down by huge debt. A panel report in 1996 "put the debt incurred by DTN at N531 million" (*The Guardian* December 2, 1996:37). At the time Enahoro took over, the total debt burden climbed to N526 million. Plants needed replacement or major refurbishing. Its giant webs offset printing machines were idle and overtaken by rust and needed replacement or major refurbishing. All its generators were grounded due to age, over use, and lack of maintenance. The company's distribution network also collapsed. All the distribution vehicles, which use to double as long distance passenger transport, were all grounded. The company's distribution had grown from six low tonnage vehicles in 1956 to more

than 60 heavy and light vehicles at the peak of its management success in the 1970s.

All the DTN subsidiaries such as *Times Press*, *Times Books*, *Times Leisure Services* and others were all distressed. The London-based West African Publishing Company, publishers of *West Africa* magazine was forced into liquidation. The 82 year old subsidiary was liquidated in April 1998, by a British court, and was bought by the Graphic Corporation of Ghana in 1999. Most the titles of the DTN such as *Fun Times*, *Lagos Weekend*, *Evening Times*, *Times International* are extinct. For a long time, nothing concerning human resource development was mentioned in a company that used to offer general training to its staff covering such areas as technical finance, production, salesmanship, cost control, packaging and lithography. The DTN had a training school established in 1965, expanded in 1972, was renamed Time Newspaper Training Centre, and later as Times Journalism Institute.

The deplorable condition of the company put it in dire financial straits, and led to irregular and non-payment of salaries of staff for as long as 10 months. With escalating debt profile, demands of creditors, immense court cases, cessation of publications and lack of even a token motivation, workforce morale is forced to its lowest ebb. Widespread disillusionment among the longsuffering staff became manifest in strikes. Aggrieved workers went on strikes severally, often using abusive and derogatory messages and employing violence.

What problems Enahoro needed to solve to move the DTN forward were

major re-engineering of obsolete machines, restructuring of management on a long term growth strategy, granting of wide autonomous power to subsidiaries as well at revival of Times Press Limited. (*The Guardian* June 23, 1997:35).

He made radical changes upon takeover, such as “the scrapping of the editorial board, investiture of full editorial power to the editor, editorial changes and movement of corporate headquarter from Kakawa street to Agidingbi” (*The Guardian* December 2, 1996:37) for effective management. Editorial changes included reformatting of the newspapers logos. He also acquired lease hold vehicles to boost circulation of

publications. One of the most painful measures the took to strengthen the company's activities as a commercial enterprise was the pruning of the workforce. About "1,125 workers representing 45 per cent of the entire work force of 2,500 nation wide, were laid off. The downsizing exercise was meant to rid the company of "an insidious civil service structure and mentality" that "ate its way into the company's activities" (*The Guardian* January 26, 1998:40).

With these measures the image and public perception of the DTN group began to change in the first 18 months. Circulation figures rose by 25 percent and advertising revenue went up to whooping 350 percent. But these giant were short lived. As Enahoro in *Vanguard* (April 29 1999:14) writes, ministerial statements made about the *Daily Times* "needlessly revived the suspicion that the Ministry of Information directs the operations of the company", Issues that should be the business management were usurped by ministerial directives without prior consultation with the company. All efforts at recapitalisation of the dying company through NICON, which holds 60 percent shares on behalf of Federal Government, were stalled by the Ministry of Information. Attempts by Enahoro to look inwards for financing through sale of unserviceable equipment and dormant assets were also maimed by government bureaucracy.

Such was the state of the company when Adinoyo-Ojo took over the management of the newspaper in August 1999, with the mandate to turn it around and make it viable for privatisation. Major problems remained lack of adequate working capital, obsolete equipment, heavy debt burden, credibility problems arising from the paper's antecedents, its perceived closeness to government, a demoralised ill-motivated workforce as a result of unpaid salaries, unattractive products, poor editorial content and packaging, rampant incidents of pilfering, heavy workforce, lack of up to date condition or service of editorial policy, high incidence of waste and lack age as well as absence e of a board of directors.

What Adinoyi-Ojo did within 10 months of taking over was the "to change the ownership structure of the company from the civil service orientation of the Federal Ministry of Information to the more business-like approach of our new parent company NICON Insurance plc" (*The Guardian* June 12, 2000:50). He reduced the workforce from 1,300 first to 600, then to a manageable size of 388, blocked all sources of

leakages and wastes, improved editorial content and production qualities of various titles, and refocused the company mainly on its core business of publishing and printing.

With freedom from Ministry of Information and a new Board of Directors, he sought and obtained a N145 million NICON Bureau of Private Enterprises /BPE loan with which he cleared salary arrears and retirement benefits of staff, bought a generator, refurbished the printing press, installed a new colour Orient Press (which was imported and abandoned at the ports), brought newsprint and improved distribution facilities. With these measures, the company increased its print run and circulation substantially. It introduced the *Daily Times* on Saturday and redefined the *Sporting Times*. The company pursued a programme of computerising the editorial, administrative, personnel and accounting operations, and planned to make available online, all publications of the DTN. In 2001, the DTN was able to hold its AGM and audit its books since the 1994/95 financial year.

The delay in privatisation has not helped the company, rather, it is worsening its problems. In October 2002, the federal government gave up its 60 percent equity holding and the process of diverting the shares was the offer for sale of 1.09 billion shares to the public and existing shareholders. But the N1.09 billion when realised will not be ploughed back into the company entirely. The *Guardian* (November 25, 2002:64) writes that N399 million will be used for loan repayment to NICON and BPE while the remaining will be retained for capital expenditure on “purchase of a new printing press, operating vehicles computers, digital library, area network and overhauling of its orient press”. The DTN has improved editorial content and rationalised publications it can no longer sustain. Instead of publishing these as separate titles, management adds them to existing papers as a sort of selling point. In this, *Digital Times* is now part of the Monday package of *Daily Times*, *Sporting Times*, *Lagos Weekend* and *Times Review* are inserts in the Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday editions respectively, while *Headlines* is part of the *Sunday Times* Package. The *Daily Times* has begun to come alive again, and looks more promising but only just as that.

Conclusions

Government ownership of newspapers is without doubt in the throes of demise. State owned newspapers are on their way out of existence. They have lost out as viable economic institutions, and the political basis for their establishment has since become obsolete. In Nigeria, government ownership of the press is regarded as a symbol of authority and a vehicle of political control. But as Edeani (1985:499) observes, "...in no society has government competition with private interest in day-to-day publication of newspapers been received kindly by an enlightened public". And "where public acceptance is lacking" he continues "the credibility and hence effectiveness of such newspapers is undermined by public distrust". Edeani concludes:

In owning daily and weekly newspapers, the federal and state governments hope to mould public opinion in ways they perceive to be in the interest of their policies. But in doing so, they are at the outset fighting a losing battle, since they are aiming their publishing effort at the wrong audience – the educated and elite segment of the population which is precisely the group that is usually the most sceptical about government propaganda (1986:49).

Government newspapers are no longer accepted in Nigeria. Government ownership is undermined by public distrust. The federal government's *Morning Post* became extinct early 1973 due a drastic loss of reader interest and a deterioration in the paper's content and physical appearance. The Nigerian public revolted against reading the newspaper which they said contained no more than government bulletins and press releases. Government meddlesomeness and interference in the editorial and management of its newspapers is largely responsible for the erosion of public trust and confidence, credibility and effectiveness of its newspapers. Today, all state newspapers are suffering the fate that befell the *Morning Post* in 1973.

Various state newspapers are in different stages of transition and are leaving in their trail a legacy of obsolete and decaying equipment, heavy debt overhang, an obsequious editorial policy in the classic civil service tradition, a culture of pilfering, and a demoralised ill-motivated workforce. Creative and resourceful journalists have since left state

employ. What is left is a residue of an extant and blitzed colony, who lack initiative and fear risks, who are content with civil service drab and routine idleness, just for survival.

Contributing to they demise of government newspapers is a succession of legal suits and the difficulty in adapting their news, editorial and production habits to the harsh realities of a business climate, caught up in the wave of globalisation. Today it is unthinkable to compare state owned newspapers with the passing age of cyber journalism whose high point is the publication of electronic newspapers.

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