

**ADVERTISERS' INFLUENCE ON EDITORIAL DECISIONS OF  
GOVERNMENT-OWNED BROADCASTING STATIONS**

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## Abstract

Government-owned broadcasting stations face a complex and often contentious relationship between advertisers and editorial content and a station's content and message can be significantly influenced by advertisers who provide the funding for its operation. This paper illuminates the influence of advertisers on editorial independence of government-owned broadcasting stations. The paper reviewed some related literature and adopted political economy of mass media theory to explain how advertisers of the political-economic dimensions exert heavy influence on news production and execution to shape news content. It was concluded that while broadcasting stations depend on advertising money to stay in business, the pressure to keep up that revenue might damage editorial integrity and cause advertisers' interests to take precedence over the interests of the general public, while it was recommended there should be alternative funding sources by government-owned broadcasting stations in order to lessen their reliance on advertising revenue.

**Keywords:** Advertisers, Broadcasting Stations, Editorial, Independence, Influence, Government-Owned

## Introduction

Arguments about the impact of commercial interests on editorial content in newsrooms have intensified and resurfaced globally as a result of the advertising industry's growing influence and falling revenues among many news media companies in developed and industrialised nations. According to Codrington (2015), economic difficulties have resulted from editorial decision-making and growing commercial interests, shattering the integrity of news values and journalistic expertise. Lewis, et al. (2008) points out that despite the traditional expectation that editors work independently by separating themselves from influences emanating from commercial or occasionally ownership interests, advertising departments within media organizations are having a significant influence on editorial decisions due to increasing economic pressures. Koch and Riesmeyer (2017) say the emergence and growing digital transformation of journalism, which has significantly transformed the traditional news gathering and processing processes, has resulted into redundancies and diminishing resources for newsroom operations. This has led to a growing demand for and dependency on pro-commercial service providers such as public relations firms for editorial content, which is largely skewed to serve the interests of advertisers. This has led to increased concerns about editorial freedom in most news organizations. Codrington (2015) states that although newsrooms are guided by a set of procedures and codes of conduct that seek to protect journalistic works against commercial influence to ensure their autonomy and integrity; they are often ignored due to economic demands on the editors to use commercial-friendly content. This scenario has often led to the widely debated tension and conflict in the media circles on the fact that nearly all media organisations, with exception of government owned or sponsored, depend on revenues from advertising as profit and for survival, thus escalating the tension between commercial and editorial objectives.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) discuss forces that influence media content. Advertising is identified as one of the chiefs outside influencing agents, along with sources, the government, the marketplace, and technology. Most discussions about advertising influence on news content focus either on specific incidents where an advertiser has brought direct pressure to bear in an attempt to influence news coverage of their business (Auletta 1997; Overholser 1997), or the indirect pressure that comes from advertisers' preference for programming with high ratings (Clary, 1997; Underwood, 1993).

Advertising influence is often tied to profitability concerns. News is the cash cow in many broadcast operations (Smith, 1997). McManus' model of news production

“suggests that for mass-mediated news supported by advertising, achieving the greatest return requires a subordination of most journalism norms to market norms” (McManus, 1995). Given the profit pressures on broadcast journalism operations, the potential for advertiser influence is very real. As Howard Kurtz pointed out in a Columbia Journalism Review roundtable in spring 1998, “If you’re in the business of basically being a transmission belt for a particular advertiser, then your first allegiance is to the advertiser” (“The erosion of values”, 1998).

The reoccurring themes in these discussions are concepts like credibility (Herbert, 1998), impartiality (Joseph, 1998), and integrity (Hentoff, 1998). These are contrasted with statements on paying the bills (Overholser, 1997), business enterprise (Auletta, 1997), and increasing the audience for broadcast news (Clary, 1997). In essence, the debate comes down to a contrast between journalism ideals and commercial realities. McManus (1995) characterizes the tension quite simply: “The principal norm of journalism, whether broadcast or print is to inform the public. The principal norm of business is to maximize profits over an indefinite period”. Despite the inherent risks, journalistic enterprises, including broadcast news operations, must work within commercial reality, striving to attract both audiences and advertisers. Advertisers must determine how to take advantage of the still-credible position that television news enjoys within most communities without diluting that credibility through attempts to influence content

## **Literature      Review**

### **Advertisers’ Influence**

The relationship between media and advertisers is best described as a symbiotic one. The central issue raised is about how far the media count on advertising revenue. This in turn leads to a question about the degree to which media content serves market ideology and advertisers’ interests (Burton, 2005). According to Garnham (2000), we need to understand the nature of the advertising market in order to understand the media economy and what is and is not sustainable within it. A media organization can be defined as the social, formal, usually economic entity that employs the media workers in order to produce media content, generating income is the primary goal of most media organizations (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Other goals such as to produce a quality product, serve the public, and achieve professional recognition, are built into this overarching objective. The organization obviously cannot afford to ignore the economic goal indefinitely despite success in achieving professional objectives. For example, many television companies in Indonesia are privately owned, the owners can operate the business as they see fit. Although only

few television media in Indonesia are owned by public stockholders. However, this form of public ownership intensifies the purely economic objectives of the company. Managers of publicly traded companies can be replaced if they fail their responsibility to the stockholders to maximize profit. The stock market cares little for public service if it means sacrificing profitability (Burton, 2005)

Most media institutions depend very much on the work of, or on revenues from, advertisers to finance their operation and reap profit. Television stations count on advertising entirely; Quality newspapers rely on advertising for about two-thirds of their revenue; magazine producers rely on advertising for 50 per cent and more of their income and the tabloid press for about one third. In turn, advertisers depend on the media for a vital means of communication with customers (Burton, 2005). In this regard, advertisers are stakeholders behind the advertising text, from media brokers doing deals over the cost, consultancies to video outfits shooting commercials, to brokers who place the commercials in certain media, to any business or organization that contracts with the advertisements. Those who work in newsrooms frequently see economic considerations as indirect influences on editorial decisions and as constraints to their work. News workers find it hard to relate the quality and nature of their news coverage to audience demand and advertising revenue (Sigal, 1973). Would one story, for example, raise newspaper circulation or television ratings more than another does (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991).

The mass media do not rely on the audience to get revenues but on advertisers. Audiences who tune to a station to hear or view its programmes do not make direct payment for the programs they receive. Advertisers, who gain access to those audiences with information on their products and services, purchase advertising time sold to them by the media. The sales department is the principal generator of revenues for the media. However, its ability to sell time is determined to a large degree by the media creative workers in drawing audiences, especially those that advertisers want to reach. Good programming attracts audiences, which in turn attract advertisers and revenues. It is not surprising that advertisers' interest influence greatly the structure of much of the mass media industry in most capitalist countries. According to Shoemaker and Reese (1991), most media in free-market countries are finely tuned to jointly optimizing the needs of advertisers and sponsors as well as their own interests as a normal condition of operation. The 'normal' influence involves the matching of consumption patterns of targeted audience with media content to be produced. Media design, scheduling, planning, layout, often reflect advertiser interests.

According to Altschull (1984), the interests of those who finance the press have strong correlation with the content of the press. He said, “The press is the piper, and the tune the piper plays is composed by those who pay the piper.” There is substantial evidence that both advertisers and audiences affect media content, both directly and indirectly.

According to Burton (2005), advertising as an activity supports the ideology of the marketplace at any price. The marketplace ideology includes promotion of product, pleasing consumers, commercial competition, company expansion, and maximizing profits. The tendency of media owners to support the dominant ideology, the security of the status quo and conservative values, is effectively guaranteed by advertising. In this market economy model, reducing production costs and increasing audience consumption control any genuine pluralism of material or of ideas. The consequence of the patterns of ownership and of the production practices of media owners, combined with the collusive relationships between media and advertising, result in the meanings of media text, the dominant discourses that produce certain kinds of meaning about how the world should be (Burton, 2005). This interest in the work of institutions in manufacturing discourses within a text is part of a political economy critique of the media. McQuail (2000) who quoted Baker (1994) said that ‘advertisers, not government are the primary censors of media content in the United States today’. He cites evidence of advertisers using their market power to attempt to block particular communications that damage their interests and of advertiser pressure, which influences personnel as well as editorial decisions in the media. However, influence comes in diverse forms that are often hard to detect and not necessarily illegitimate (for instance providing information that has a promotional value, product placement, sponsoring, etc).

Jamieson and Campbell (1983) said advertisers sometimes are not afraid to “use their financial muscle to protest what they perceive as unfair treatment by the news segment of the mass media”. Because the survival of commercial mass media depends very much on their advertising income, the bigger the advertiser, the more income it has. Large multinational advertisers and their advertising companies therefore have huge power to contain public messages they do not like. According to Kessler (1989), one kind of advertisers who made the most attempts to control mass media content were tobacco companies although some of the controls may be self-imposed by the media themselves in an attempt to deter censure by cigarette producers. For example, Kessler (1989) reported that there was almost no editorial content about any health hazards of smoking -“the number one cancer killer of

women”- in six major women’s magazines published in U.S although women’s health was a major topic in the magazine.

Weis and Burke (1986) said editors of U.S women’s magazines frequently told the writers or contributors who wrote about health topics for the magazine to stay away from the subject of tobacco. They also said that the film industry was also affected by the power of tobacco advertisers. Advertisers often paid film producers to display smoking as an appropriate, desirable behaviour among socially active adults. Tobacco companies offer to help underwrite film making costs; in return, the filmmaker agrees to portray the key characters in the film as smokers. Although tobacco commercials in some countries are no longer permitted on television, the tobacco companies spend millions of dollars advertising non-tobacco products on television. Advertisers or sponsors, who bought whole shows, or major portion of a show, regularly read a script a day or two in advance of shooting. Gitlin (1985) said at the behest of an ad agency for a gas company sponsor, CBS took out half a dozen instances of the word ‘gas’ referring to gas chambers in a ‘Playhouse 90’ drama of the Nuremberg trials. After the quiz show scandals of 1958, CBS president Frank Stanton set down an explicit rule that advertisers would no longer be permitted to read scripts in advance and intervene if they thought their corporate image at risk. Stanton said advertisers would be permitted to screen the filmed episodes, and if they wanted to beg off a particular one, the network would excuse them.

### **Advertisers’ Influence on Government Broadcasting Stations**

The relationship between the editorial content of government-owned broadcasting stations and sponsors is a complex and occasionally contentious issue. The programming and communication on these channels can be significantly shaped by the sponsors who provide them with the necessary financial support (McChesney, 2015). This might potentially compromise the editorial autonomy and impartiality of these channels, both of which are often expected to prioritise the public interest.

Advertisers can exert influence on editorial content by utilising advertising income as a means of leverage. Government-owned broadcasting stations, similar to commercial ones, depend on advertising revenue to finance their operations (Picard 2011). Advertisers might exploit this reliance to exert influence on stations, compelling them to steer clear of or minimise coverage of topics or narratives that could be detrimental to their own interests. This might result in a scenario where the station's editorial choices are influenced mostly by the necessity to sustain advertising revenue rather than by a sincere dedication to serving the public (Bagdikian 2004).

Advertisers can also exert influence through more subtle means, including as strategically placing their commercials within the station's content, and determining their prominence. Stations may be incentivized to avoid broadcasting content that could be perceived as harmful to their sponsors or to prioritise content that is more beneficial to those advertisers (Croteau & Hoynes 2006). When the audience is not presented with an unbiased and objective depiction of the news and information, it might result in a distorted image of the subject matter and events. The influence of advertisers can significantly impact the editorial independence of government-owned broadcasting stations. This influence can undermine public trust in the station's impartiality and accuracy, and it can also have broader repercussions for the overall health of democracy (McChesney 2015). The public's trust in organisations designed to represent them is likewise diminished when the media is perceived as being influenced by special interests.

In order to maintain their financial viability, newsrooms have undergone restructuring, resulting in reduced resources allocated to cover a wide range of topics. This situation has also made editors more susceptible to manipulation by commercial interests, as they seek to either enhance or safeguard their revenue sources from being scrutinised or portrayed negatively by journalists. Cohen (2015) argues that journalists are particularly susceptible to economic pressures due to their limited resources and time constraints, which hinder their ability to do thorough research and in-depth reporting.

In any democratic culture, the media is not only anticipated to safeguard, but also advance the public interest, particularly against authoritarian powers of the government and other oppressive forces within capitalist societies. Given that the Nigerian media, including both print and electronic platforms, are predominantly owned by private and state entities, they are expected to function as profitable commercial enterprises that provide returns and dividends for their owners. Newsroom decision makers are confronted with various factors to consider while choosing which stories to broadcast. Journalism is driven by professional principles such as public service, commitment to the truth, journalistic independence, and social responsibility (Gade, 2014). Hence, the correlation between financial interests and editorial judgement is evident, since the existence of one necessitates the presence of the other (Martin & Souder, 2012; Cottle & Rai, 2014).

### **Relationship between Editorial Decisions and Advertiser/Commercial interests**

Editorial decisions are the manner in which editors determine whether or not to cover a news event and the format in which the content will be packaged and

disseminated whereas commercial interests are forces that play the gatekeeping role of ensuring that any editorial content that is detrimental to the interests of the media owners, government, and advertisers is either neutralised or done away with by editors. Media especially, private owned face immense commercial and political pressure that could erode their editorial independence (Brousseau, 2016). Media owners often carry favours with advertisers and sponsors of media products and services to secure or retain advertising contracts. For most media owners, commercial interests are more important than media independence (Franklin, 2014). Commercial interests also come from shareholders and strategic business partners. Although media owners profess independence, what happens in practice is different. Big spenders on advertising wield immense influence in media houses which influences editorial outcomes such that in most cases news coverage is geared towards protecting the interests of media owners (Urbany, 2013). There is a thin line between the interest of editors and owners. Media owners often delegate authority to senior editors to transact business and make industry decisions on their behalf (Brousseau, et al. 2016). Under this arrangement, it is difficult to know the interests the editors serve when making critical decisions that could, in the end, affect the independence of the media. Media managers and editors must have the business skills to be able to resist the attempts by governments and other non-media actors such as advertising agencies and businesses to influence or manipulate content through placement of advertisements.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted a theoretical framework of political economics of mass media, which is a socio-critical method that primarily investigates the connection between the ideological content of the media and its economic structure and dynamics (McQuail 2010). The field of political economics in relation to the media focuses on distinct elements such as media ownership, organisational structure, business activities, audiences, and content. Additionally, it analyses the correlations between these phenomena and the influence of governmental rules and regulations on these practices (Weiss, 2017). The published literature examines editorial autonomy in connection to social ties that encompass political, cultural, and economic aspects. Shoemaker (1991) also aligns with the conclusions of Herman and Chomsky, who view journalists as gatekeepers that often shape public opinion in favour of influential interest groups due to their reliance on the information provided by these groups (Herman & Chomsky 1988: 298).

The political economy of the media, as described by Mosco (1996), examines the interconnected social relationships that revolve around power and how they

influence the control and distribution of news content. This is consistent with the viewpoint of Herman and Chomsky (1988), who also acknowledge the correlation between political power and journalistic coverage. Utilising the media for their personal benefit enhances their capacity to sway and control public sentiment. Media owners and controllers are motivated to just pay superficial attention to liberal-pluralistic values.

Is the mass media primarily a commercial enterprise or a moral undertaking? The field of political economy has offered the most comprehensive analysis of the resolution. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky authored "Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media" in 1988, introducing the propaganda model of the media. The Propaganda Model of media operations elucidates the correlation between communicative ideological power and political, economic, and social power. This model also examines the ramifications of media content dissemination. Herman and Chomsky argue that a significant portion of mass media outlets are controlled by wealthy individuals and large corporations. Furthermore, they contend that media managers, who oversee the material, are subject to direct influence from owners and other market-driven factors that prioritise profit, imposing strict limitations. This approach identifies the "five filters" in society that dictate how news is handled by media organisations. News items are subject to either economic interests or influential constraints, so limiting press freedom due to the dominance of free market ideology, since media corporations prioritise profit-making. The theory proposes five filters that determine the "merit" of a news item for presentation in mass media. The classes include ownership, size, and profitability of the medium, as well as the funding sources of the media, which primarily come from advertisers.

Advertising serves as the primary revenue stream for broadcasting stations, therefore ensuring that the interests of advertisers and the market are given great attention. In summary, the model indicates that the ownership and advertisers of the political-economic components have a significant impact on news development and execution, ultimately shaping the substance of the news. The third filter, known as the "sources," examines how news is socially formed (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Klaehn, 2005a). The sources associated with the institutions exert significant influence over news discussions. Thus, ultimately, news also mirrors the objectives of institutions at a broader level. The fourth component of the concept emphasises the influence of role power. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), the dominant institutional players possess social-political power and utilise this position to exert control over media performance.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are many facets and a complex relationship between advertising and the editorial content of government-owned broadcasting stations. Even while these stations depend on advertising money to stay in business, the pressure to keep up that revenue might damage editorial integrity and cause advertisers' interests to take precedence over the interests of the general public. In order to tackle this matter, it might be imperative to explore alternative funding schemes or enforce more robust measures to preserve the editorial autonomy of these significant public establishments.

## **Recommendations**

Government-owned media stations should explore alternative funding sources to reduce their dependence on advertising revenue. This can involve contributions from the public, memberships, or partnerships with non-commercial organisations.

It is imperative to provide training and education to the workers at their stations regarding the need of editorial independence and how to effectively resist pressure from advertisers. They may incorporate this into their regular professional growth.

In order to ensure that government-owned broadcasting stations prioritise the public interest over advertising interests, it is necessary to implement more rigorous regulatory oversight of these channels.

Establishing clear and unequivocal standards for advertising is crucial in order to ensure that it does not undermine the editorial independence of these channels. In order to promote transparency, it is imperative that these proposals are accessible to the broader public.

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