



The State, the Media: Conceptual Elucidations and the Nigerian Context?

Adeniyi S. Basiru

Department of Political Science,
University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria,
e-mail asbash72@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper undertakes two tasks. First, it critically examines conceptual problematique surrounding the concepts of the state and the media in literature, and second, it empirically teases out state –media relations in Nigeria with the objective of understanding the character of the relations. Drawing mainly from secondary data sources, it contends that while there are conceptual ambiguities revolving around the concepts of the state and the media, there had also been uneasiness in state-media relations in Nigeria which cannot be divorced from the authoritarian character of the Nigerian State. It recommends, among others, the deconstruction and decolonization of the meddlesome Nigerian State.

Keywords: The State, the Media, decolonization, authoritarian, political communication

Introduction

Central to the disciplines of Political Science and Mass Communication are the concepts of the state and the media. However, as central as these concepts are, they elucidate theoretical prisms and interpretations which often perplex foundational students of political communication. It is against this background that this paper attempts to theoretically link the state, the arena of politics and the media, the agency for information dissemination in the society. By so doing, it is hoped that students of Politics and Government in Nigeria and elsewhere aside from being armed with the theoretical weapons regarding the State would also appreciate the ontological basis of

the media. Likewise, students of Mass Communication would hopefully understand the *raison de' tat* of the State in addition to their knowledge of the media. This is even more justifiable, in contemporary era, in which efforts at bridging interdisciplinary theoretical bridges have bourgeoned (Zezeza, 2006:4).

The rest of the paper is partitioned into four sections. The second section presents the ontology of the state and the media. Section three examines the relationship between the State and the media in a liberal democracy. The fourth section, in a retrospective fashion, x-rays state-media relations in Nigeria. Chapter five concludes the paper.

Setting the Framework: Deciphering the Ontology of the State and the Media

In this section, we attempt to lay bare the ontology of the state and the media by conceptualizing them. To start with, concepts are fundamentally important in seeking and expressing knowledge and in guiding inquiry. As a matter of fact, our perceptions provide a basis for conceptions and once conceptions have been developed, we are more likely to see what they name. Therefore, when a researcher or knowledge seeker perceives a new pattern or a new phenomenon and gives it a name or creates a new concept, many others become aware of its existence. However, concepts must be defined in order to give clarity to them. As Rubin and Babbie (1989:12) once remark “we specify what we mean when we use particular terms for the purpose of facilitating their contextual operationalization and comprehension”. Thus, for easy comprehension in this paper, the two key concepts that are germane to this paper are problematized, beginning with the state and then the media.

Conceptualizing the state

Although, there are many organizing concepts in political science but the concept of the state stands out (Raphael. 1970:27; Barry, 1981:46). However, despite its exalted status, it remains the most problematic in the field of political science as practitioners have not agreed on what constitutes the state. As Ake

(1985:105) remarks “the concept of the state remains of the most difficult in the social sciences. Rich in meaning and beset with controversy, it appears to become more elusive still with every attempt to clarify it”. Therefore, as an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1962), it has been accorded different meanings by theorists of various ideological persuasions. At this juncture, it is necessary to assert that despite the difficulties in grasping the nature of the state, its existence is felt in all facets of life (Held, 1984: Ley, 1976:43)

For instance, Miliband (1969: 49) avers “it is not a thing as such, what it stands for is a number of particular institutions which together constitutes its reality and which interacts as part of what may be called state system”. In other words, the state is largely an abstract entity concretized only by the medley of institutions which operate in its name. Specially, the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the army and the police symbolize the state. Aside from these institutions, Egwu (2006:410), identifies other ontological features of the state to include: specific personnel that occupy specific positions within the state activities of those who may be broadly defined as governing elites. Aside from these institutions, Egwu (2006:410), identifies other ontological features of the state to include; the specific personnel that occupy specific position within the state activities of

those who may be broadly defined as governing elites. Indeed, Hague and Harrop (2007:13), re-echoing the Great German Sociologist, Max Weber, argues that the state alone, because of its uniqueness, claims not just the capacity but the right to employ force.

Specifically, Weber, drawing inspiration from Hegel, constructed a model of a unified bureaucratic edifice where the use of force is the prerogative of the state. He contends that the state is based on a monopoly of physical coercion which is legitimized (sustained) by a belief in the justifiability and legality of this monopoly and as such it has the capacity to enforce its power within its territory and to project the same into the international society. For Weber, “a state is a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (cited in Geertz and Mills, 1948:78).

Instructively, the Weberian definitional framework has become so popular and widespread that it has been embraced by many traditions. For example, in the field of international law, the basic component of Weberianism has been embedded. Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention of 1933 on the Rights and Duties of States summarized the major feature of the state thus: it must possess a permanent population, a well – defined territory and a government capable of ruling its citizens and

managing formal diplomatic relations with other states (Kegley, 2007: 539). In a similar vein, Hague and Harrop (2007:13) see the state “*as a political community formed by a territorial population subject to one government*”.

By this definition, a non-territorial population, like the Palestinians, does not constitute a state. Also, a territory still under control of external authority is strictly speaking not a state. A notable example is Puerto Rico, an entity affiliated to the United States. Puerto Rico lacks sovereignty which Jean Bodin (cited in Hague and Harrop, 2007:16) refers to as untrammled and undivided power to make law. It is a known fact that laws made in Puerto Rico are subject to higher laws elsewhere. Thus, theoretically speaking, a Bodinian state is symbolized by a set of institutions, at the centre of a geographically bounded territory, where the state has a monopoly over rule-making (McCauley, 2003:20). Whether these attributes are replicated in reality in an entity like Nigeria is an issue for another day but theoretically speaking, Nigeria like many other territorial entities in Africa is a state (see Clapham, 2003:29; Herbst, 2004). So much for the state. Let us now shift our conceptual compass toward the media.

On the Media

To students of Mass Communication, conceptualizing the Media may not be problematic; but to other students, it may be a great

problem. However, it should be emphasized that the concept of the media like other social science concepts is contested (see Gallie, 1962). To this end, it has been conceptualized in different ways. According to Oxford Dictionary of Current English (2001:560), “media” is derived from the Latin word “medium” which represents television, radio and newspapers as the means of mass communication. A question is apt here: what about other means of mass communication, say traditional modes of communication? Generally, the media encompasses the channel between the sender of a message and the receiver. However, the receiver of the message could be an individual (e.g. a wife receiving a letter from the husband via a post) or a multitude of individuals (or simply the mass). The former depicts interpersonal communication while the latter symbolizes mass communication. Accordingly, mass media in the opinion of Hague and Harrop (2007:121) refers to method of communication that can reach a large and potentially unlimited number of people simultaneously. Such methods, according to them include the radio, television, newspapers, posters, cinema, magazines, blogs and websites. Another issue that we note in literature on the media is its conflation with the press which traditionally refers to print news media (Oloyede, 2008: 68). However, the modern press which encompasses the newsprint media and the electronic

media are used interchangeably with the media.

Given the foregoing, the media or the press, for the purpose of this paper, refers to the print and electronic media of mass communication in a given community. Thus, by the Nigeria media or the Nigerian press; we mean the communication media that inform and educate the citizens of Nigeria. How do the media fare in discharging this historic mission? Before this question is answered, let us examine the relationship between the state and the media in a liberal democracy.

The State and the Media in a Liberal Democracy

To start with, we must first emphasize that the society (liberal or illiberal) and its politics is created, remodeled and sustained through communication. Without communication contend the duo of Hague and Harrop (2007:121), a society is impossible. As succinctly remarked by Oloyede (2008:27) “communication is the central fact of human existence and social process” The point being made here is that communication is so central to social interaction. As a gregarious being, individuals must communicate their views and feelings to others in the society. Thus, whether an individual is a member of a school, a club, a city or a nation, they must communicate with other members of the school, the club, the city or the nation as the case may be. However, in a mass society, where the need to

communicate with a large number of people is a necessity, the mass media plays a major part. Within the polity, the media serve as the channel of communication between the state and the citizens. Ojo (2008:165) identifies three important roles of the media in society vis:

- i. They inform citizens on matters of public policy and politics by presenting and debating alternatives.
- ii. They act as watch dog by uncovering political, economic and corporate corruption as well as other forms of abuse of power or inept policies.
- iii. They help empower the citizens to be aware of their civil and political rights and how to exercise these rights.

Needless to say here that the aforementioned roles are instrumentalized in a liberal democracy where opportunities for learning about relevant alternatives policies and their consequences are provided for the citizens (Dahl, 1998:37). In a liberal democracy, the government that acts on behalf of the state is chosen through free and fair elections. Citizens of voting age are entitled to vote, and to permit effective choice, citizens can join and form political parties. Aside from being chosen by the citizens, its powers are also limited by the constitution of the land. The constitution in question, guarantees some fundamental rights to the

citizens of the state. Danjibo (2010:52) itemized these rights as:

- i. The rights to life
- ii. The right to human dignity
- iii. The right to participate in decision making
- iv. Respect for the rule of law
- v. Security of life and property
- vi. The right to vote and be voted for
- vii. Freedom of speech
- viii. Freedom of association
- ix. Freedom of the press
- x. Freedom to live freely everywhere.

Thus, in a liberal democracy, the state and its apparatuses are governed by the constitution of the land. At the intra-governmental level, the executive is watched and monitored by the legislature and the judiciary. This is to ensure that individual liberties and rights are not trampled upon by the executive arm of government. Specifically, the legislature, either in a presidential or parliamentary system, watches over the executive. In discharging its ‘oversight function’ guaranteed in the constitution, it makes sure that public policies are implemented to the letter by the executive and its bureaucracy.

At the extra-governmental levels, all the organs of governments, the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, the bureaucracy are watched and monitored in the ‘public space’ by the civil society, an entity which Diamond (1999) defines “as the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating

and at least partially self supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules". This is where the media as an institution comes in. In fact, since the advent of liberal democracy in the Western world, the media has become part and parcel of the democratic processes. In these climes, the media aside from expressing public opinion also watches over the actions of the government. Through the media, the citizens get to know about the policies of the government and while at the same time, the government feels the pulse of the citizens via the media. However, it should be noted that the media perform this linkage roles only if they are free. Here, it must be emphasized that freedom of information defined by Oloyede (2008:53) as expression devoid of undemocratic, unreasonable or illogical hindrance, is crucial in liberal environment.

The point being made here is that a free and independent media supports democratic growth and development (Hammer, 1979). Even in emerging democracies, this ideal is recognized, at least, in theory. In Nigeria for example, the architect of the 1979 constitution created in chapter II Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of the State, and stated the obligation of the Nigerian media in section 21 thus: "*The press, radio, television and other agencies of mass media shall at all time be free to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to*

the people' With this constitutional provision, the media was expected to serve as the vanguard of the truth. In a nutshell, the media in a liberal democracy, exhibits independence or vibrancy than in other regimes. In comparative terms, a non-liberal authoritarian regime offers a contrast.

In such an environment, the truth to be upheld by the media is not conceived to be the product of the great mass of people but of a few "rational men" that must guide their fellows. In essence, truth, official or otherwise, is domiciled at the centre of power. Thus, the media only function to disseminate what the autocrat thinks is the truth. Besides, no media dare to criticize him or his aides as they exist to support his actions and policies. Should they dare him, they would be subjected to intimidation; harassment and unwarranted censorship (see Bourgault 1998: 180). As demonstrated below in the case of Nigeria under the military, the media establishments in an authoritarian regime are nothing but "toothless bulldogs". We would come to this soon.

As a way of recapitulation, the media in liberal society differ in character from those under authoritarian conditions. In the former, they contest public space with the state while in the latter they are part of what Althusser (quoted in Fatile. 2004:50) refers to "Ideological State Apparatuses". Where do we place

the Nigerian setting? The next section addresses the question.

State – Media Relations in Nigeria

Having accepted the truism that the social institutions of the state and the media are necessary for the sustenance of a society, the poser now is: what is the relationship between the two? In this section, we answer this question in the light of the Nigerian experience. However, before we proceed, it is appropriate to review theoretical literature on state-media relations. Basically, four theoretical perspectives or models purport to analyze state – media relations in society (Fatile, 2004:51). Frey Siebert et al (1956) identified them as: the authoritarian theory, the libertarian theory, communist theory and social responsibility theory. However, due to space limitations, we will only elucidate on the first two theories, that is, the Authoritarian and libertarian theories.

According Agee *et al* (1982) the authoritarian theory posits that officials acting on behalf of the state have a monopoly of wisdom and they only know the truth. In other words, the media thus exists to serve the state and its functionaries. This theory believes that the media like all other social institutions (education, religion, economy etc) must be controlled and monitored by the state. In addition, the theory argues that in order to prevent state implosion, the media, and the bastion of free expression must be controlled and monitored. In all, the media must

work within the framework provided by the state.

The libertarian theory contends the media exists independent of other social institutions including the state. Indeed, the state institutions, especially the judiciary, recognize such independence. As an independent entity, it upholds the truth without fair or favour Agee *et al* (1982) contend that the theory postulates a free market of ideas where truth and falsehood contend pressuring that truth would prevail. Indeed, Oloyede (1996:3-4) has identified the three ingredients of media autonomy under libertarian model of media-state relations. The first is the assumption of the presence of a plurality of voices on all public issues at all time. The second is the absence of state control over the media in line with the principle of *laissez faire*. The third is the financial independence of the media.

At this juncture, we note that those theoretical expositions offer robust perspectives on state – media relations but which one fits into the Nigeria circumstances? Our survey of literature on the subject indicates that the first perspective fits into the Nigerian social milieu (see Nwankwo, 1993: Olatunji and Uyo, 1996; Olukotun, 2002; Ojo, 2004). In specific terms, the media in Nigeria, despite their gallant strides as a vanguard of democracy, have not had it easy with the Nigerian state.

We recall here that the foundation for today's media was laid long before the emergence of the Nigerian state in 1914 (Usman, 2009:125). Prior to that time, the media establishments interacted with missionaries. Some of the leading papers of this era included: *the Iwe Irohin* (1859), *Anglo Africa* (1863), *Lagos Times* (1880), *Lagos Observer* (1882), *Eagles and Lagos Critics* (1883), *Lagos Weekly Record* (1891), *Lagos Standard* (1894) and *Nigerian Chronicles* (1908). However, with the emergence of the colonial state, and its contradictions, the post – 1914 media assumed a new role. As Fatile (2004:44) “The Nigerian press took on the role of opposition to the government through its activities, it encouraged sense of political and nationalist awareness and involvement by providing the medium of criticisms of the authorities”. However, the colonial authorities tried as much as possible to stifle the media. For example, it was alleged that Governor Lugard, while censoring some print media, also courted and funded British newspapers. With the exit of Lugard and the formal integration of the disparate political entities in the 1940s, the media became the arrowhead of decolonization struggles in Nigeria. Like the previous epochs, it was harassed and intimidated by the colonial authorities. Were things different after independence? As contended earlier, the media irrespective of how one assesses as the time of writing this paper have

not enjoyed the required independence. It is instructive to note that the post-independence Nigeria as briefly stated earlier has been run by two types of regimes vis the civilian and the military. The latter before May 29, 1999 had ruled the country for thirty-nine years. The former ruled for ten years before 1999 and as at today, it has ruled for thirteen years making a total of twenty three years.

In the two military eras, 1966-79 and 1984 – 1999, the media were seriously under official siege. About the military eras, Ojo (2008:175) remarks “*in a beleaguered state for long*”. During this eras, Generals Muhammed Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, adopted various strategies to tame the media. Some of these included the promulgation of decrees to muzzle the media. Indeed, one of such decrees, Decree No.4 of 1984 entitled “Protection against False Accusation”, was used to jail two journalists – Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor both of the *Guardian Newspapers* for publishing the list of ambassadorial nominees. Their newspaper, the *Guardian* was also fined N50, 000 by the government (see Osaghale, 2004:22). The regime of Babaginda was also accused of the killing of the founding editor of the *Newswatch* magazine, Dele Giwa, by a parcel bomb in 1986; and the six-month ban imposed on the *Newswatch* magazine in 1987 after it published the report of the political

bureau which prescribed the guidelines for return to civil rule.

The Abacha regime of 1993-1998 was very sensitive and conscious of the dissent of the media against it, so it made many obnoxious decrees to gravely check-mate the activities of the media. Among these was Decree 43 of 1993, which stipulated stringent rules and conditions for existing newspapers, the establishment of the Nigerian Media Councils, and the National Communication Commission, all directed at arm-twisting the media. The regime also clamped down on media houses and journalists, seized copies of newspapers and magazines and many journalists were killed in what looked like state-sponsored killings (Olugboji, 1997).

It is instructive to note that it was this spate of state-directed violence against the media, most especially under the regime of General Abacha that led to the growth of the underground or guerrilla press especially in the Lagos area and beyond. During this period, many quality magazines, which the government regarded as opposition papers like the *Tempo*, *The News and Tell*, went underground, because it was the only avenue opened to them to do their investigative journalism and publish the highly needed news and information at that time (read Adebani, 2008; Olukotun, 2008). In this regard, Dare (2007:72), writing from the perspective of *The News* magazine, opines: 'the six months that followed turned out to

be a period of vicious confrontations with the military. It marked the transformation of the magazine from a normal operation to a near clandestine one. We simply went underground and continued our work by adopting guerrilla instincts to survive'.

At this juncture, it is instructive to note that while the military were notorious for violence and brutality against the media (Afowowe, 2012:109), the civilian regimes have equally curtailed press freedom despite the constitutional guarantee. During the first republic for example, the Official Secret Act curtailed the free practice of journalism. Also, since the return of the civilians in 1999, state institutions mostly the executives continued with the culture of violence against the media. For example, President Olusegun Obasanjo, during his reign, was known to have displayed open hostility towards the media. One notable example was the shutting down of the *Insider Weekly Magazine* without first obtaining a court order (see Ojo, 2008:181). In fact, this singular act made the Human Right Watch through his Executive Director Africa Division Peter Taxivambuddle to state "*Even though military rule has ended Nigerians still cannot express themselves freely without fear of grave consequences*" (see Tribune, 03/12/03).

The point being made here is that whether under civilian or military, it appears that the media have been

treated in manner that devoid of civility. It thus appears that the character of the state-media relations since 1914 has not really been transformed. The Nigerian state, in its totalistic character, has always seen the media and other civil society institutions as entities that must either be co-opted or conquered. According to Ake (1996) its absolute and totalistic character has made its custodians to see other social institutions as being subservient to it. It is in this context that this paper situates the relationships between the state and the media in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper set out, mainly, to clear the conceptual underbrush associated with the phenomena of the State and the media. Next, it examined the relations between the two phenomena under various regimes in

Nigeria. Specifically, it found out that irrespective of regime in Nigeria, the media operate in an authoritarian orbit as the character of the Nigerian state has remained the same. What is to be done? Firstly, there is the need to reform, amend or if possible repeal some of the draconian laws that continue to harm string the media in Nigeria. Some of these laws are not only anti-media but also anti-democratic and anti-development. Secondly, the judiciary needs to be further strengthened to perform its avowed duty of checking the excesses of state agencies. Thirdly, the entire Nigerian structure needs to be reconstructed by the people via an autochthonous constitution-making process. The Nigerian state as it is presently constituted is alien to the people of Nigeria. It needs to be indigenized, decolonized and democratized.

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