

Emerging Global Conglomerates in Nigeria- Giving Voice to the Voiceless

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Abstract

Separate and diverse small media outlets/firms that cannot stand on their own, that are dying or that have been out rightly bought by bigger media firms form conglomerates. Conglomerates belong to individual(s) or a group of persons that control what goes in and out of various media outlets. A number of conglomerates have emerged in the world from America to South Africa and other African countries. Nigeria however, does not have any group of media outlets that it can call a conglomerate. One or two persons that have diversified in their media reach are referred to as 'media moguls' but not conglomerate owners. With advancement in technology and the need for various media outlets that will air the opinions of the 'voiceless' in the society; media conglomerates in Nigeria are not far-fetched. Freedom of expression and the idea of a free marketplace of ideas are the arguments against media conglomerates. Using the discussion qualitative research method and laying emphasis on the dependency, knowledge-gap, development media and agenda-setting theories; this study examines the advantages of media conglomerates and the positive impacts it will have on being a 'voice' to the 'voiceless' in the country that adopts this approach.

Keywords: Media Conglomerates, voiceless, voice, freedom of expression, media owners

Introduction

Conglomerate, conglomerates or conglomeration as the case may be are words that have caused arguments, agreements and disagreements in different sectors of the human life. The Corporate Finance Institute (CFI, 2015) defines a conglomerate as a very large corporation or company formed by merging with other smaller companies who may or may not be able to stand on their own; buying smaller companies or taking over smaller companies. Conglomerates invest in, manage and supply variety of goods and services that are related, interrelated or not necessarily related to one another. Different countries have called 'conglomerates' different names. In China, it is called *qiye jituan*; *Business Houses* in India; *Grupos economicos* in Latin America; *Holdings* in Turkey and *chaebol* in South Korea (Ramachandran, Manikandan & Pant, 2013). No matter the peculiar name given, the definition and concept of conglomerates remain. Berkshire Hathaway Inc in Nebraska, United States is one of the biggest conglomerates in the world known to own companies that provide insurance, some financial services, retail goods, transportation as well as provide utilities (CFI, 2015).

In different countries of the world, conglomerates have been in existence for some time. In India, the *Tata Group* has been in existence since 1868. In Hong Kong, *Jardine Matheson* has been existing since 1832; *Doosan* in South Korea since 1896 and *Mitsubishi* in Japan since

1870 (Ramachandran, Manikandan & Pant, 2013). Milord (2013) noted that in America, the top conglomerates are Bertelsmann SE and Co., Gannett Company Inc., CBS Corporation, British Sky Broadcasting Group Plc, Liberty Media, News Corporation, Time Warner Inc., The Walt Disney Company and Comcast Corporation. Ruud (2011) noted that NBC and Comcast, both being media outlets merged to form a conglomerate and this rose eyebrows as that merger is the largest in the United States media history. Conglomerates can emerge when smaller companies or outlets are faced with extreme risks, when internal markets for capital labour provides an edge and when resources have facilitated a clear strategy for combining activities in different industries (Standler, n.d.).

Ibrahim (2012) defines media conglomeration as the merging of separate and diverse small media outlets/firms to form a large company. These small media outlets could include the television, radio, newspapers and today, the internet. Major news distributors are parts of large corporations and conglomerates and this makes information available to the public dependent on the interests of these organisations (Maharjan, 2018). In many places across the world, leading multinational corporations control media stations (Bagdikian, 2009 in Barbradozier, 2013). Barbradozier, (2013) states that a small cluster of powerful media conglomerate owners' controls what the entire populace hears, reads, listens to or does not access at all. Media conglomerates comprise mainly a cluster of mainstream media and media outlets. With the increasing growth in technology, some organisations and conglomerates now own online media platforms. This study will look at different media conglomerates around the world; find out if media conglomerates exist in Nigeria, the pros and cons of media conglomeration; the impacts of media conglomerates as a voice to the voiceless and then recommendations will be based on the findings.

Media Conglomerates around the world

The trend of media conglomeration has been steady especially in America over the years. About 50 corporations controlled America's media in 1983 which included books, newspapers, movies, television and radio (Bagdikian, n.d.). Over the years, the number dropped to six and then to five prominent ones. According to Solanki (2018), the world's largest media conglomerate is The Walt Disney Company in America which owns the ABC television network and 10 other broadcast stations. Media conglomerates in America is not limited to traditional or mainstream media as "80 percent of the top twenty online news sites are owned by the 100 largest media companies. Time Warner owns CNN.com and AOL News (Bagdikian, n.d.). Other notable media conglomerate owners around the world are Rupert Murdoch, Conrad Black, Sumner Redstone and Ted Turner (Jackson, 2012; Nshehe, 2011).

Jackson (2012) and Nshehe (2011) mentioned that in Africa, the biggest media conglomerates are *Naspers*, owned by Koos Bekker; a South-African which controls about twenty-three magazines and big internet companies in the world. The *IPP Group* in Tanzania founded by Reginald Mengi and it controls about ten national newspapers, two popular television stations as well as diversifications in a bottling company, soap, detergent and toothpaste. Another leading conglomerate, *Nation Media Group* in Kenya, founded in 1960 by AGA Khan and whose CEO is Linus Gitahi; controls about seven major newspapers, three television and three radio stations in Kenya and expanded its media outlet reach to Tanzania and Uganda. *Royal Media Services* is owned and chaired by S. K. Macharia and based in Kenya. This conglomerate owns the country's dominant television station (*Citizen TV*) with a strong focus on local programming and eleven national and other local radio stations. *Radio Africa Group* is yet another big conglomerate in Kenya co-founded by Ghanaian Quarcoo and it owns six Kenyan radio stations, television stations and the third largest newspaper in Kenya (*The Star*) - established in 2007. South-Africa is not left out of the media conglomerate business as *Avusa*,

headed by Prakash Desai is a very big conglomerate that owns sixteen newspapers, nine magazines, cinemas, record labels and other retail outlets.

In Nigeria today, the media is owned by individuals, corporate organisations or bodies and/or the government. However, a few individuals and corporate bodies have a number of small media that merge to be a group. In Nigeria, according to Jackson (2012), Ben Murray-Bruce started Silverbird Productions in 1980 and it has grown to be a conglomerate with him owning cinemas, television stations and radio stations. Another big media mogul, Raymond Dokpesi, pioneered the first television network in Nigeria, African Independent Television (AIT) in 1966 and set up the first privately owned radio station in 1994. He is regarded as a media guru but his companies do not add up to be a conglomerate. There are no big conglomerates in Nigeria today like other African and American countries but with the growing and rising trend in technology and technology advancement, conglomerates are not far-fetched. Nigerian media owners can start the move towards owning conglomerates and using it as a voice to the voiceless and for development.

Burgeoning Studies against Media Conglomeration

Different studies have shown and reflected that a healthy democracy thrives and requires a robust and diverse press to enrich its marketplace of ideas and hear everyone out; not a press owned or controlled by individuals or the government (Oloyede, 2008). Solanki (2018) states that democracy cannot thrive where there is no argument, conflict of opinion or competing viewpoints. Barbradozier (2013) states that media conglomeration has caused a lot of agreements and disagreements over the years as private entrepreneurs take their time and spend money to control the open market of ideas thus; this market of ideas is open to a few privileged ones. This then affects freedom of expression. Kivel in Ruud (2011) states that in conglomeration, the media does not experience true democracy and thus, reflects the ideas and opinions of the ruling class alone. The online media is not left out of distorted or partial democracy when expression is controlled by a few privileged ones as individuals with powerful online presence dominate the media and influence what is seen and heard. Top trends and issues that are widely discussed online are those raised by a few elite, celebrities and the government. These ones set the tone, method, layout and quality of programmes and content online and it becomes concentrated on them and less on public interest (Ibrahim, 2012).

Furthermore, Caplan (1997) in Shah (2009) opines that free expression is subtly threatened by global conglomerates and not just by authoritarian governments thus, reducing meaningful diversity of expression in different parts of the world. Fulton (2012) agrees with Ibrahim (2012) that conglomeration combines many voices into one and local vital voices and opinions are lost in the process. The local media is seen to play a very important role in covering a range of issues which media conglomeration may throw into the bin. A blind poet, John Milton in Ruud (2011) opines that freedom of expression and marketplace of ideas are threatened with media conglomerates as ownership falls in the hands of a few persons. Ibrahim (2012) noted that media conglomeration is threatening democracy as profit seems to be the main focus of conglomerates and this leads to 'hyper-commercialism', media bias and elimination of the local media. As many media institutions exist on advertising revenues, these media outlets might be manipulated and owners become loyal to their advertisers and sponsors, and not the viewers (Zhang, 2014; Bagdikan, 2009 in Barbradozier, 2013 & Solanki, 2018). With global media conglomerates, local news takes a backseat and this can have a negative impact on journalism (Solanki, 2018). The FCC (Federal Communications Commission) in the United States according to Fulton (2012) established media ownership rules in the 1970's and this helped to protect local markets from being controlled by a small handful of owners thus, conglomeration was discouraged.

The disadvantages and issues identified from owning and operating conglomerates have made many media houses around the world run away from conglomeration. However, there are a lot more advantages than disadvantages.

Theories in favour of Media Conglomerates

The dependency theory proposed by Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976 coins its propositions from the Uses and Gratifications Theory. This theory regards the audience as a very active part of the communication process. The audience uses the media to satisfy its needs and it depends so much on the media for information, support and advice. The ‘voiceless’ in the society will pay more attention to media outlets that hear them out and make them feel they are a part of the society. Media conglomerates in the hands of a few owners can leverage on the dependency of the audience to air the same or similar content and push it in various media outlets. Conglomerates can push content that will meet the emotional, physical and entertainment needs of the audience such that as they connect with or interact with any medium belonging to a conglomerate, they will find something that suits them. From the assumptions of this theory, the ‘voiceless’ in the society when dependent on a particular media conglomerate will have the confidence that they can air their views on such platforms and they will not be hindered. This gives the conglomerate a bigger advantage and the number of persons that come together to patronize their media outlets will bring more profit as advertisers place their messages in stations with the highest audience base.

The Agenda setting theory propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972/1973 assumes that the media does not always determine what the audience thinks but what they think about. The audience in this theory discusses and pays attention to issues that the media put their faces and although they have a choice to ignore; they tend to keep thinking about these issues. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008) opine that the number of times an issue is reported is most times responsible for agenda-setting and the more people are exposed to the same message and media, the more they will place importance on the same or similar issues. Media conglomerates will bring about social interactions and relationships by setting agenda for the audience and when the different outlets push the same content to the audience, they will end up talking and discussing the same issues which will lead to national development. Conglomerates can pick local issues and push them in all their outlets and this will become the agenda for many people during that time and the voices of the voiceless or the less privileged will be heard. When the same or similar content is being pushed in the faces of the rich and poor, young and old, small and big; everyone everywhere will be on the same page in their discussions and communication.

Anaeto et al (2008) in their comments on the knowledge-gap theory posits that the information-rich are those that have access to modern mass communication and make use of it while the information poor are those who are not very educated, have small resources and do not have access to modern media. They further mentioned that the information poor do not have access to the internet and they do not have the knowledge that will lift them up to success or make their voices heard. Media conglomerates who have merged or acquired small media outlets including radio, television, newspapers and the internet will help to bridge this knowledge-gap. The people considered as ‘information-poor’ audiences may not have access to the internet but will have access to radio and probably television. Media conglomerates can push the same or similar content online, the radio, newspapers and television which will air the opinions and voices of the voiceless thus giving them opportunity to be knowledgeable. Knowledge-gap when closed leads to positive social interactions and intelligent discussions in a society.

Development is a very important issue for countries around the world. Developed countries carry all their citizens along in major decisions and they ensure every sector of a nation or communities are well represented in issues affecting the whole populace. Nigeria is a developing country and for it to become ‘developed’, a lot has to be put in place. One factor a country striving to develop cannot afford to ignore is the voice of the minority or the voice of the ‘voiceless’ in the society. The development of any nation is analyzed and measured by some important indices like Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, per capita income, those living above and below the poverty line (living standards) and mortality rates among others (Riley, n.d. and Kim, 2018). In the development media theory of mass communication propounded by Dennis McQuail in 1987; the mass media should give priority in their content to national culture and languages. Media conglomerates can project minority cultures and languages in their programmes and content for a large number of people to see. A further assumption of the theory is that the media should give priority to news and information that link with other developing countries whether geographically, politically or culturally. Stand-alone or individual media outlets might not have enough resources, man-power and connection to link effectively with developing countries but conglomerates can pull all their resources together, push through and ensure development is achieved.

Media Conglomerates: a voice to the voiceless

The media needs a lot of money to run and keep up in business. However, if advertisers do not patronize media outlets, they may run out of funds and go into extinction. To prevent many media outlets going down, bigger media companies can buy them and form conglomerates. This affords people the opportunity to retain their favourite media platforms and stay glued to them.

Christian in Politics notes that the ‘voiceless’ are the poor, weak, vulnerable and those who have been let down by any system(s) around the world. In their opinion, the ‘voiceless’ can be heard when the political system stands up for them and hears them out. The media and especially a cluster of media outlets owned by one or a few persons can aid the political leaders to be responsible by amplifying the voices of the ‘voiceless’ and political leaders in the system can work to make everyone recognized. Alper in Callahan (2018) states that ‘the voiceless’ are the unrepresented, disadvantaged or vulnerable people in a society. She goes a step further to mention that disabled men, women and children are the ‘voiceless’ in a society who want to be heard and reckoned with among their peers and counterparts. For the purpose of this paper, the ‘voiceless’ are the people in a society that do not have a say in media content, not adequately represented or who are pushed/ignored because the media focuses on the ‘upper class’ or ‘elite’ of the society.

The media is expected to be the ears, eyes and watchdog of any society; a voice to the voiceless. The *voiceless* have a voice when they enjoy the right to seek, hold and impart opinions, right to free expression, intelligence and knowledge without hindrance (Oloyede, 2008). Bajracharya (2018) notes that every person has the right to speak, express and publish their opinions in the media for their *voiceless voices* to be heard. Citizens should have confidence in the media as a vehicle to air their thoughts, opinions and ideas and the media is expected to be a veritable and important tool for social development. The media that will be relevant and reliable for the citizens is one that is independent, free to communicate, gather information, protect sources of this information and not subject to autocratic control (Oloyede, 2008) Barbradozier (2013) as stated above opines that media conglomerates do not encourage free marketplace of ideas. In a contrasting argument however, Rosenwein in Shah (2009) disagrees and says that a few huge corporations controlling outlets of expression could lead to a more

-muted marketplace of ideas and less aggressive news coverage. Information that does not necessarily need to be aired for everyone to see is curbed and controlled better by conglomerates. With conglomerates, no everyone will have access to the numerous media outlets and this will help manage the information disseminated. Information that can cause harm, chaos or violence in a society will be properly managed by a few persons and this will lead to orderliness. In addition, for development to thrive, one ‘voice’ should prevail in a society. With conglomerates, there will not be too many disparities in the information communicated to citizens. Conglomerates can further cover news stories of the ‘voiceless’ or less privileged in the society and project their views and opinions.

Diversification as defined by Boom, Allen & Hamilton (1985) in Tseng (2015) is a means of spreading a media’s base to achieve improved growth. The development of one idea or concept for various media leads to synergy and reduces cost of production. A group of ‘voiceless’ persons might have an idea to be sold to a large number of people. For instance, an area or community in a state or country that has been abandoned for years might be the main idea that is to be sold to the public. Such information can be packaged in diverse ways like in a story, article, music label, television cartoon, drama, comic book or even a game. If that idea will be passed through a single media outlet, only one form of production can be sold out (either via the electronic or print media). However with media conglomerates, multiple media outlets will afford them the opportunity to pass the same information across to the intended audience in different ways.

Synergy in media conglomeration also involves cross-promotion. Media houses and outlets have programmes, movies, creative content, articles or shows they want to project to the audience. Programmes can include entertainment, education or cultural promotion. ‘Minority’ groups or cultures in the society may have a particular programme on any media outlet that promotes them, their people and their culture which includes language, dressing, mode of greeting, food they eat, parties, ceremonies and so on. Cross-promotion which is projecting a single idea in different media is made possible with media conglomerates. Minority cultures, ideas from the ‘voiceless’ and other opinions can be communicated though the variety of outlets in the conglomerates (Tseng, 2015).

Covington (n.d.) opines that “Nigerians want to interact with foreign news agencies, but they do not want to lose control of the way their nation is presented in the global marketplace of ideas”. Individual media outlets may have to go through a lot to present Nigeria favourably to the foreign market and interact with them. However, recognized and large conglomerates will have better opportunities, man-power and privileges to interact with foreign media outlets, present Nigeria and listen to the opinions of the voiceless. More often than not, international media outlets that disseminate information about Nigeria do so from their point of view and project majorly what they are doing to make Nigeria better. The reality of activities in the country is therefore not seen or heard in the world at large. To them, Nigerians are then regarded as the ‘voiceless’. To be heard in the committee of nations and the world at large, big conglomerates can promote the true image of Nigeria, air the opinions of Nigerians and give a *voice* in its entirety through its programmes on all the conglomerates’ outlets.

Global conglomerates have diversification in their outlets and although controlled by a central body, are geared towards different audiences and groups of individuals. One or a few persons can control the various outlets and cater for different segments of the society. Conglomerates give room for greater efficiency as they will pull their many resources to give the audience the best they can offer and it will reduce competition among individual media outlets. International

competition is reduced with media conglomerates as they compete with other media outlets locally and internationally and they can withstand the pressure and issues that might come up (Pettinger, 2018). Media conglomerates can take advantage of simultaneous revenue streams and generate profit from a single idea.

Media outlets pay tax to the government as every business, as long as it derives its income from Nigeria is expected to pay tax (Sanni, 2019). Individual or stand-alone media houses have to pay tax to the government, with no regard for the profit or income that is generated. Conglomerates however have advantages as together, they can pay the tax required by the government without fear that they will run down financially.

Solanki (2018) writes that media outlets stay on when they project and air what the audience wants. Media conglomerates will push the same or similar content in all their outlets and this affords the audience the privilege to push what they want to see, hear and read in all the outlets acquired by a conglomerate. Conglomerates help to improve the quality of information, messages and programme content sent and messages passed to the audience (Basu, n.d). In contrast with Barbaradozier's argument in 2013 that democracy thrives in press diversity and many outlets, true democracy thrives in a press free of government interference and control. Media outlets in the hands of a few owners (conglomerate) pushes government control out of the way as numerous outlets are controlled by a few persons. Many government policies and issues affect the media like the Decree 4 of 1984, where the military government restrained and prohibited the circulation of certain newspapers, the authoritarian rule over the press where the state controlled the media and the public officers' decree of 1976 among others. The public officers' decree prohibited journalists or media houses from publishing or circulating anything considered wrong or harmful to any public officer. The government decided what was considered 'harmful' or not. Many media houses and journalists lost their lives and property when government interfered with its policies and rules. As government makes and enforces policies, individual outlets are more affected than conglomerates. Media conglomerates can make policies that will regulate all its outlets to prevent government harassment and they can also stand as one better than individual outlets. News stories and opinion pieces will be censored by many more persons in conglomerates and punishable items will be removed from media content. Conglomerates also afford people the opportunity to suggest and select what they want to see and hear which reflects true democracy. With the change in government over and over again in Nigeria; independent media houses sometimes cannot stand the test of times and policies each new government brings with it. Conglomerates however being a big, large body of outlets can stand the test of times regardless of the government and the constant change in ideas, ruling and control (Covington, n.d.). In Nigeria today; many government policies, rules and decrees affect the traditional media more than digital/online media and thus, many voices are shut or not heard for fear of being traced and punished (Asogwa, 2015). With the advancement in technology and the use of the internet as a major media outlet today; conglomerates that own online media outlets in addition to the traditional outlets can use their online platforms to project the voices of the 'voiceless' if the traditional media outlets are very threatened. It can then be argued that governments are now putting policies in place to control content on the internet. However, the online platform is very wide and not easily traceable or monitored like the traditional outlets. Groups, communities, individuals and organisations can then air their views online. A very good example of the internet serving as a medium for the *voiceless* was the "Enough is Enough" online protest in April, 2010 where youths insisted that then Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan be made Acting President. That move led to the 'doctrine of necessity' and this made the national assembly pronounce him Acting President (Asogwa, 2015). The minority or 'voiceless' in the society can come together and pull their

weight by raising salient issues that pertain to them online. They can also form a conglomerate on their own and be in control of many online sites and one or two mainstream media.

With advancement in technology, many individuals, groups and corporations are on their toes to reach their audience with the best technology available. Media conglomerates seize the advantage of technology to reach a large number of people with the same or similar message(s) which may not be possible and very effective in diverse media outlets. More choices at lesser prices are then available to the audience (Solanki, 2018). In addition, media houses do a lot and strive to have the audience share of the market to attract advertisers and sponsors. With conglomerates, the audience has lesser choices to select from and this becomes a plus to these media houses as the audience concentrates on them and their programmes and audience base is built.

Advertisers are not left out of the benefits conglomerates offer. Although, arguments before now have not gone in favour of advertisers in media conglomerates; however, when advertisers send their messages to the overall administrative body of a media conglomerate, they can be sure that their adverts at a lesser price than individual media outlets will be aired to a large number of audiences. Thus, they can tailor one message to different audience groups without much deliberations and setbacks.

Some scholars have argued that the diversity and the independence the internet brings as a medium will hinder conglomerates from existing online as the world is going global. However, Krause (2016) has stated that some internet platforms are fast becoming conglomerates as Facebook has acquired other online platforms like WhatsApp, a very large social media and interaction platform; Instagram and Messenger. Amazon has grown into a conglomerate and so has Google. Apple might also grow into a conglomerate as time goes on.

A conglomerate that controls an online platform alongside mainstream media provides everyone the opportunity to air their opinions and views and make informed decisions by presenting a variety of perspectives and the main points in any issue (Fulton, 2012). Social Media, a major online platform affords ‘ordinary’ people the opportunity to address a very large audience (Fietkiewicz, 2018). Asogwa (2015) notes that not many Nigerian voices cannot be heard via the traditional media because of the expenses involved in airing opinions on television, radio or in newspapers. However, with the advent of the internet and technological advancement, online platforms provide greater opportunity for the *voiceless* to be heard. Conglomerates around the world now own internet platforms and Nigerian media can use the opportunity; own online platforms in their conglomerates and allow citizens to comment, send in their challenges, opinions and thoughts on issues. This can then be featured in traditional media content and thus, everyone’s voices will be ‘voiced’. In a later review and in contrast to the FCC’s previous rule in 2012, Solanki (2018) said that the commission proposes to “allow a large corporation in the top 20 media markets to own a major newspaper, two television stations, up to eight radio stations and also provide internet service”. Other associations and bodies can adapt this and set up rules that will be strictly adhered to which will curb the excesses of conglomerates.

Conclusion

Having looked at the meaning of conglomerates, media conglomerates and that there are big conglomerates in the world doing excellently well; Nigerian media and media owners should begin to consider conglomeration and owning conglomerates- buying off media outlets that are on the verge of collapsing, merging with other outlets or total acquisition of media houses. Conglomerates will help the *voiceless* to be heard as their opinions will be pushed in different outlets, advertisers will have the opportunity to send their messages to many people at lesser

prices and more choices of media to select from will be available to the audience at cheaper prices. In addition, conglomerates rather than individual media outlets can stand against harsh or severe government policies and the online platforms can be positively used to hear everyone out. Tax required to be paid by businesses can be put together as conglomerates and this reduces the overall amount of tax to be paid if they were individual media outlets.

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