TOWARDS REDEFINING THE NEWS AGENDA IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

The media (radio, television, film, print, social networks, etc) are change agents in contemporary world. They can be/should be deployed to ensure the culture of peace as well as galvanise other agents of development in 21st century societies, especially in Africa, where peace and sustainable development appear to be eluding many countries, including Nigeria, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, Somalia, to mention a few. Appraising the state of affairs in Nigeria, Igbuzor (2006) warns that several intelligence reports on Nigeria indicate that if the country is unable to create about 24 million jobs for its growing population, to provide effective platforms and infrastructures for fighting corruption, and to ensure equitable distribution of its abundant wealth, it could become a failed state.

The questions of youth restiveness, unemployment and all shades of crime have taken a dominant space in global discourse, even as youth intransigence is threatening to shred the fabric of the Nigerian society (Ugor 2009; Onuoha 2009; 2010; 2011; Omoera 2013). If this were to happen, it will not only unsettle Nigeria, but disrupt the relative peace and security in West Africa and indeed the African continent as a whole. This is a grave issue that

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demands urgent attention considering the position of Nigeria in the sustenance of peace in the West African sub-region and indeed the whole of Africa.

Nigeria is located in the West of Africa and it is the largest black nation on planet earth, with a population of about 170 million people (Omoera and Aihevba 2012). It occupies 923, 768.64 sq. kilometres, roughly sharing international boundaries with Benin in the West, Niger and Chad in the North, Cameroon in the East and the Atlantic Ocean in the South. Nigeria has over 450 indigenous languages spoken within its borders (Hansford, Bendor-Samuel and Stanford 1976; Grimes 2000; Anyanwu 2011; 2012). It is a multi-faith, multilingual and multicultural country. By October, 2014, Nigeria will be 54 years, having attained political independence in 1960.

However, Nigeria is beset by a lot of issues, ranging from the emergence of ethnic militias/terrorists groups such as Egbesu, Odua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Boko Haram, etc, to general insecurity of lives and properties; pervasive official corruption to failing public infrastructures; self-serving political class to despondent, crime-prone youth populations, grinding poverty to religious indignities, to mention a few. All these appear to have culminated in the clogging of the wheel of peace, progress and development of the country, which was once touted to be the 'giant of Africa' but with so many failed promises in spite of its huge potentials. This study uses Nigeria as a reference point for the African situation because whatever happens in Nigeria tends to reverberate across the African continent.

Theoretical Grounding

Theoretically, the agenda setting theory (AST) of the media as put forward by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) and refigured by Stanley Baran (2002) provides an intellectual foundation for this study. McCombs & Shaw (1972, 176) during their very influential research on the role of the media in the 1968 presidential elections of the United States of America, observe that:

> In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position [...] the mass media may well

determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the "agenda" of the campaign.

Overtime, AST research has demonstrated that the more stories the news media do on a particular subject, the more importance audiences attach to that subject. In relation to AST, Baran holds that the "media may not tell us what to think, but media certainly tell us what to think about" (2002). He further argues that the agenda setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or on the page. Also important is the fact that there is a great consistency between media sources across all media in the choice and type of coverage they give an issue or event. This consistency and repetition signal to the people the importance of the issue or event.

Campbell, Martin and Bettina (2007) largely agree with the foregoing. They posit that when the mass media pay attention to particular events or issues, they determine – that is, set agenda for – the major topics of discussion for the individual and society. This compass of proven capacity of the media to determine what should dominate public discourse for reasons of accelerating socio-economic and socio-political development in contemporary society has been rearticulated and reformulated by a number of other media scholars (Banda 2006; Sambe 2009; Ugulah 2009; Ibagere 2009; Ahmad and Ashara 2009; Zhang, Shao and Bowman 2012). This is particularly in relation to refocusing the news agenda of media for national development in different parts of the globe.

It is in this context that this study examines the crucial role the media have been playing/ought to be playing/should be playing in the sustenance of peace and the galvanization of sustainable development in Nigeria as a microcosms of Africa. It specifically posits that the culture of peace can ensure the security of lives and properties in the Nigerian society and the society, in turn, stands a greater chance of being economically, socially, politically as well as culturally developed, if the agents of development such as the media and their operators/professionals diligently and dispassionately carry out their responsibilities.

A Brief Historical-Analytic Survey of the Nigerian Media

The Nigerian media predates Nigeria as a country. Ufuophu-Biri (2006) traces media activities in Nigeria to 1859, when *Iwe Irohin*, a newspaper (print media) was established in Yorubaland (now Western Nigeria) by a Scottish reverend, Henry Townsend. This opened the floodgates of print journalism in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria. Subsequently, Robert Campbell published a newspaper called *Robert Campbell's Anglo African Newspaper* in 1863. Among many others that followed, there were *The Lagos Times* (1880), *Lagos Observer* (1882), *The Lagos Standard* (1908), *The Nigerian Chronicle* (1908). The next fifty years saw, on the one hand, the emergence of more provincial newspapers such as *Gaskiya Tafi Kobo*, *The Nigerian Eastern Mail*, *Lagos Daily News*, etc., and on the other hand, nationalistic newspapers such as *The African Messenger*, *The Daily Times*, *The Tribune* and *The West African Pilot*.

For instance, while Babajo (2008) notes that the production of *Gaskiya Tafi Kobo*, a newspaper written in Hausa by Gaskiya Corporation of Zaira in 1938, marks the beginning of actual newspaper journalism in the northern Nigeria, *The West African Pilot* produced by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe led the pack of critical minded newspapers that served as platforms for Nigerian nationalists to ventilate their views towards the attainment of political independence in 1960. From the 1960s till date, there has been an avalanche of newspaper and magazine titles, both regionally and nationally in Nigeria. Some of these include *The Nigerian Observer*, *The Punch Newspaper*, *The National Concord*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *The Newswatch*, *The Daily Champion* and *Tell Magazine*.

As regards the broadcast or electronic media in Nigeria, the showing of a film at the Glover Hall in Lagos in 1903, which is touted to be the first of its kind (Opubor and Nwuneli 1979), could be regarded as its historical commencement. Importantly too were the largely propagandistic broadcasts through radio redistribution services during the colonial/pre-independence period. Omoera and Okhakhu (in press) contend that, at that point in the Nigerian history, the British authorities deployed the broadcast media to brainwash Nigerians to blindly support and advance the imperialist policies of the British Empire. As early as the 1930s the British colonialists had started a wired radio system and continued to operate as such until 1949, when the first wireless broadcasting was setup under the auspices of the post and telegraph department. Two years later (1951), the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS)

was created as a separate department. In 1957, the NBS was changed to Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC1) under the corporation act (NBC1 ordinance, No.39 of 1956), with national and regional services based in Lagos, Enugu, Kaduna and Ibadan.

Today, the Nigerian media is one of the fastest growing media ecologies in Africa. From virtually nothing some 60-plus years ago, Nigeria now has over 300 radio and television stations and a complex network of broadcast operations such as the Channels TV Network, the African Independent Television (AIT) Network, Ray Power FM, Silverbird Television, and Rhythm FM besides the largest TV network in Africa, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and its sister network, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). Thus, the broadcast media ownership structure in Nigeria at present is public (in the case of NTA, for example) and private (in the case of AIT, for example) oriented but under the regulatory umbrella of the National Broadcasting Commission, or NBC2 (Okhakhu and Omoera 2010a).

Towards refocusing the news agenda in the Nigerian media for national development

> Hide nothing from the masses of our people, tell no lies, and expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories. (Amilcar Cabral 1979)

Perhaps, the forgoing words in marble speak to the need for a more robust and confident media that will be willing to hold to account those in government, media professionals (themselves) as well as the populace on issues of national importance which are critical to the speeding up of socio-economic and socio-political development of Nigeria. Although Okhakhu and Omoera (2010b), while reflecting on the Edo State, Nigeria, situation with regard to the functioning of media as agents of development, assert that the media have tried in a number of fronts, Omoera and Okhakhu (in press) argue that the Nigerian media still need to do more professionally to objectively report and interpret events for peace and national development. For instance, a situation where over five hundred (500) local government councils out of the seven hundred and

seventy four (774) in the country have been illegally headed by council chiefs handpicked by the various governors across the country for over three (3) years now is unbecoming, undemocratic, and capable of threatening the fragile peace and stability of the country. Media professionals through newspaper articles, broadcast news analysis, commentaries, among other programmes on radio and television ought to have extensively examined this ugly situation, interpret its various scenarios and implications and even petition concerned authorities such as the judiciary for constitutional interpretation and adherence to the rule of law.

Unfortunately, the Nigerian media have yet to handle the bull by the horns in this regard and indeed other knotty national issues of the day. Some media operators are wont to respond to the above accusation with mediocre statements such as 'My family still needs me'; 'my children are still very young'; 'one should not put the society problem on one's head because if one dies, society will not remember one let alone one's family'; ' I don't want to get kidnapped'; 'I don't want to get bombed'; 'I don't want to have headaches or sleepless nights over other people's wahala'; ' I don't want to be caught in a crossfire of political gladiators'; and so on. While these points may be valid or tenable in the circumstances Nigeria has found itself, the fact remains that one must live or die for something and if an altruistic/patriotic effort aimed at making the society a better place for the greater number of the populace kills one, posterity is bound to record it in one's favour and remembrance. The Dele Giwa's story may suffice in instantiating the point being canvassed. Consequently, media professionals should rise to the occasion to stem the observable growing culture of political disenfranchisement of well-meaning persons, virtual emasculation of the third tier of government in Nigeria, flagrant abuse of the rule of law for selfish political ends by those who see themselves as 'sacred cows' in the Nigerian political firmament.

Furthermore, the Nigerian media, both print and broadcast should find a way of reducing rumour-mongering and outright misinformation of the public on certain government policies, without being seen as grovelers or political jobbers. For instance, the events leading to the presidential media chat of 18 November 2012, on NTA are clear cases in point. For over a week leading Nigerian media, both print and electronic, were awash with news items in which the president was quoted to said that fuel subsidy would be totally removed in

December 2012. Following this information from media sources, Nigerians were now 'gearing' up for a showdown only for the president to clear the air with an instructive remark that if his government proposed anything of such there would not have been any need for an budgetary allocation for fuel subsidy in the 2013 budget. This is a pointer to the challenge of mediocre reporting, which a considerable number of Nigerian journalists have been accused of. Many journalists hardly do serious background research before going to press and this has contributed to the heightening of tension in the Nigerian polity. The media should check their facts, figures before going to press in order not to overheat the polity.

The Nigeria media must refocus in their crusade of reorienting Nigerians on the need to pursue national interests with vigour and patriotic zeal. Many Nigerians and even non-Nigerians have lost faith in the salvation of Nigeria. Apparently, this loss of faith has been precipitated by the many years of military interruptions, political debauchery, economic balkanization and the lack of foresightedness of persons that have been at the helm of affairs at one time or the other in the country. Nonetheless, the Nigerian media must now take it as their responsibility, albeit, an onerous one, to mobilize through objective news reporting and coverage, human and material resources to 'de-school' Nigerians from this dangerous standpoint and commence the process of confidence building among the populace. Well thought out media programmes or articles aimed at encouraging Nigerians to be patriotic, altruistic and security conscious should be regularly aired or published. It is worth mentioning that most newscasts in some broadcast channels in Nigeria now begin and end with security tips and what one may call 'psycho pep talks'. The security tips are mainly on safety precautions and vigilance in a Boko Haram era Nigeria. This kind of innovation should be fine-tuned and replicated in the Nigerian print media too.

Without mincing words, Nigeria is still a very peripheral economy in the global economic space. This is largely because it is crude oil-dependent, with over 90% of its national revenue accruing from the oil sector. Besides the fact that crude oil is an exhaustible resource, depending on it in a 21st century world can make peace and sustainable development to elude the country. It is in view of this that the Nigerian media must set the agenda through intrepid and

balanced news reports that readily engage the Nigerian political as well as economic leadership on the urgency of the need to refocus Nigeria towards a poly-economy, with multi-revenue sources and the production of goods/services of higher values. Studies have lamented that countries which have more crude oil than Nigeria are more diversified, advising the country to diversify into non-oil sectors rather than wholly depending crude oil (Omoera 2010a; Haussman 2012; Aisien and Oriakhi 2012). The Nigerian media can begin to set the economic agenda through innovative insistence that there cannot be any meaningful development in Nigeria if its economy is not diversified. In fact, media catchphrases such as 'the process of diversification is the process of development' will not be out of place, to drum into the ears of those that hold the reins of power to stop 'earmarking' but practically explore other streams of revenue for the country. For instance, Omoera (2010a) argues that the media, particularly television, hold many potentials in reinventing the tourism industry for the socio-economic and socio-cultural transformation of Nigeria.

To achieve the foregoing, the Nigerian media need to encourage and lobby the Nigerian legislature to compel managers of the Nigerian economy to concretely diversify and squarely break the electric power generation quagmire. Such a deliberate effort will help to accelerate productive activities in the economy. Overtime, a large percentage of the Nigerian populace, especially the youth, can become productively engaged, thereby reducing antisocial tendencies that can threaten peace in the society. Again, the Nigerian media must refocus in their monitoring of national budget implementation and service delivery of both public and private organizations for national development. Aside from the provisions in sections 22 and 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), which empower the media to monitor governance, and uphold openness and accountability in government, the Nigerian media should effectively deploy the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which was recently passed into law, to get the Nigerian polity to work through getting the people and structures to function. In other words, media professionals in Nigeria must boldly set the agenda of fast-tracking development at the socio-economic and socio-political fronts in the country. They must go beyond the traditional routine news reporting activities.

The Nigeria media must also take the lead in recognising and celebrating national symbols, heroes, values and history for national

development. Igbafe (2006) contends that a country like Nigeria whose historical circumstances have exposed it to the devastating impact of foreign rule and influences and which is still struggling to be properly welded together as a nation, needs to rehabilitate its sense of history, values and national symbols. The Nigerian media must set the agenda, through their news coverage, in celebrating positive heroes and peace symbols such as the Nigerian coat of arms, the Nigerian green-white-green flag, personalities (for instance, Yakubu Gowon, Wole Soyinka and Philip Emeagwali), sports victories, etc, to serve as emblems of inspiration to the younger generations who will prepared to give their all towards achieving national ideals. This subtle but concrete effort can help to rebuild in both old and young Nigerians the confidence needed to believe in their abilities to contribute to a united and integrated country erected on a foundation of knowledge of common past and a mutual understanding of a progressive future in an atmosphere of peace.

Media professionals in Nigeria should see the reimaging of the country as a task that must be done to breed a 'tribe' of constructive mentors and mentees whose avowed commitment to national development will be unshaken and unshakeable come what may. Towards this end, print and broadcast contents which extol the virtues of national symbols and ideals should be propped up to serve as propagators of a belief system such as 'Nigeria and Nigerians can'. Coupled with this is that the Nigeria media hold it as a duty to rearticulate their surveillance propensities and capacities in aid of security operatives to ensure peace and development. Nigerian media professionals must proactively respond to the current security scare of kidnapping, armed robbery, gang rapes, among other crimes, which are on the increase in Nigeria by providing print and broadcast contents which can help security personnel as well as the general public, with useful information to nip crime in the bud or put in check those persons with antisocial tendencies that can threaten the peace of the land. It would also be profiting for Nigerian journalists to take advantage of ICTs to encourage 'citizen journalism', which will make the Nigerian populace to readily empathize and provide them with useful information that can help in reducing the seeming intractable security challenge confronting the country.

The Nigerian media must begin to de-emphasise mere routine reportage of news that pander to the whims and caprices of selfish political leaders at

various levels of government in Nigeria. For instance, it is high time the Nigerian media stopped giving front-page news status to news reports such as local government (LG) chairmen grading earth roads, evacuating refuse from local markets, providing local schools with stationery, etc. Ordinarily, such activities are part of their statutory duties, which have been provided for in a budget. Aside from questionable showmanship, there is nothing ingenious or innovative about such engagements. Therefore, Nigerian media professionals can do well to take the LG chiefs to task on their budget implementation because budget implementation is a framework or index of development. It should also be part of setting the agenda for development for the Nigerian media to do more of investigative journalism in order to keep both public and private individuals and organizations on their toes to achieve set deliverables. A situation where high profile corruption cases such as the Julius Berger, fuel subsidy heist, Siemens, Halliburton and banking sector scandals remain largely unresolved does not inspire any confidence in the system and must be avoided.

Another vexatious trait of many a Nigerian media outfit today is the biased but presumptuous reportage of one-sided news items and the use of sickening prehistoric clichés that smacks of journalistic laziness and non-seriousness of purpose. For instance, on the NTA network news at 9 P.M. on Wednesday 24, 2009, the then minister of education, Dr. Sam Egwu, was granted a special interview on the state of affairs as regards the Academic Staff of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) industrial action that paralysed public universities in Nigeria. The NTA did not deem it necessary to invite any representative of ASUU or the 'striking' workers to the special interview session. This is clearly a lopsided news coverage and, to say the least, pro-government. There are several other instances of unbalanced reportage of news and the danger of such skewed, interest laced news reports is that they can unsettle the society. At another level, it is not uncommon in the Nigerian media clime to read in the pages of newspapers or hear or see on the radio and TV media irritants in matters of grave importance to society such as 'the official concerned was said to be unavailable as at the time of this news report', 'according to unconfirmed reports…', 'undisclosed sources say…', etc. These are all evasive stratagems that have increasingly made reading/listening to news in the Nigerian media boring and uninteresting. Media operators as well as

journalists should realise that balanced reportage of news is not negotiable in any forward looking media culture.

The position of Skjerdal (2009) is instructive in the above regard. Reflecting on the East African socio-political environment, as well as a critical assessment of the media's own role in development, Skjerdal argues that the media should not just support the ruling class (party) in their reporting and commentaries. He further argues that if reporting is mainly seen as routine work with focus on news coverage and dissemination, then it is rightly a matter of knowing the practical skills. If, however, reporting is seen not only as dissemination, but also as involvement in the public discourse and active engagement in the cultural and national formation, then it becomes clearer that the journalistic craft or media practice involves more than simply knowing the techniques to be used in the editing room or conventional news media (newspapers, Internet, radio, television). This presupposes that the Nigerian media must engage in responsive and responsible practice that unearths hidden significant information on issues that concern the public for the greater good of the country. However, the greatest challenge in Nigeria and indeed in Africa is the inability of the media to live up to their social responsibility (Iredia 2004). This is the crux of the matter, which Nigerian media professionals must frontally address by refocusing their news agenda for national development. Again, putting in place certain support systems for Nigerian media professionals is critical to leveraging the fourth estate of the realm's catalytic role in ensuring growth and development in Nigeria.

Support Systems for Nigerian Media Professionals: In lieu of Conclusion
Although Omoera (2010b) has previously noted that the media have done much in consolidating the Nigeria's growing democracy, the use of freebies, 'co-opting', death threats, craze for lucre, assaults, intimidations and fear of kidnapping and assassination of practising journalists have greatly weakened their ranks in the country. Therefore, emplacing certain support systems for media professionals can go a long way in assisting them to effectively serve as cornerstones of societal growth and development. This is more so because for development to come and be sustained, it must be in a peaceful atmosphere.

And the functional imperatives of the media (information, entertainment, interpretation, transmission of values and linkage) are crucial to the maintenance of a culture of peace. Here lies the nexus between the media, peace and development. A relevant illustration of the critical role the media can play in putting societal issues in perspective and in the public domain is the recent increase in the pump price of premium motor spirit (PMS) by President Goodluck Jonathan that almost conflagrated Nigeria. The media, including, social networks were inundated with animated arguments for and against the removal of fuel subsidy. In the end, superior arguments, largely purveyed by the media in conjunction with the labour union, civil societies and the masses resulted in a 'compromise' to save the country from going under (Okhakhu and Omoera 2010b).

In spite of this, some kind of 'overhauling' is needed to make the Nigerian media more robust and development minded. First, the practice of media in Nigeria must be data-digital driven, wherein computer-assisted journalism will become the norm. Media operators and journalists must train and retrain as well as acquire the necessary facilities and competences to deploy information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their investigations, news reporting and analysis. Expectedly, Nigerian journalists should engage more in interpretational and investigative news reporting, drawing attention to critical areas such as rural integration and development, religious tolerance, environmental, gender, mental health, among other issues that a majority of Nigerians know little or nothing about. Structures should be put in place by both public and private media organizations to give journalists a sense of mission, commission and assurance that come what may their efforts can not be in vain. A situation where journalists are mercilessly beaten or incarcerated by security operatives under one pretext or the other should be discouraged. There are several instances where media professionals have been beaten/threatened/incarcerated by both known and unknown persons because of their even-handed coverage of burning national issues. The several threats to the lives of anchors of broadcast programmes such as Focus Nigeria on AIT network and Good Morning Show on Edo Broadcasting Radio, Benin City, and the recent incarceration of two print media journalists in Kaduna by the State Security Service (SSS) men are regrettable drawbacks to the agenda setting functioning of media professionals who by training are essentially progressive-

minded people who are totally committed to the ideals of social progress, peace and stability of society.

Professional media bodies in Nigeria such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Radio, Television and Theatre Workers Union (RATTAWU), the Institute of Mass Communication and Information Management of Nigeria (IMIM) must work in tandem to procure an effective insurance policy and welfare system for their members who constitute the bulk of practising media professionals in Nigeria. The thinking here is that with a solid welfare system in place, journalists can rest assure that in the event of any eventuality, their dependants will not suffer and as such they are likely to give their all in the line of duty. Media professionals deserve to be handsomely paid, inspired and motivated by media owners/governments or their employers, not just because of the ostensibly inclement climate of operation but because they are painstaking professionals worthy of attractive welfare packages. Importantly too is the need to maintain professional ethics without which Nigerian journalists may not be able to truly contribute to national development. Sobowale (2009) argues that at best journalism is not designed to make you feel good, but to tell you what you must know, whether you like it or not. Therefore, a situation where state councils of professional bodies such as NUJ are embroiled in mudslinging, corruption charges, internal squabbles, power tussles, among other antidevelopment activities should be avoided at all cost. The crises that have engulfed the Edo and Adamawa States' councils of NUJ in the last few years are a sad point of reference that should not be allowed to occur again.

In sum, the Nigerian media must reappraise their role since the coming into being of Nigeria as a nation and make necessary amends by learning from history. In this context, media professionals in Nigeria must strive to play the game according to the rules; ethics that guide the profession must not be sacrificed at whatever cost. It is worth reemphasizing too that practicing journalists in Nigeria must raise the ante in their interpretational and investigative news reporting activities to, among other things, sensitize Nigerians on national ideals and aspirations; encourage peaceful co-existence among the diverse peoples of Nigeria; awaken national consciousness on the need for security and loyalty to the nation; create the capacity and template for

reasoned and critical judgment; and serve as unprejudiced agenda setters in the discussion of issues for an all round national development of the country.

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ABSTRACT

Employing the historical-analytic methodology, this study focuses on the news agenda in the Nigerian media. It sues that there is the need for news reporting and coverage activities of Nigerian media professionals to be redefined in order for them to be able to effectively contribute to sustainable peace in Nigeria, which is a sine qua non for development. In this context, this study examines the crucial role the media have been playing/ought to be playing/should be playing in the sustenance of peace and the galvanization of sustainable development in Nigeria as a microcosm of Africa. It specifically posits that the culture of peace can ensure the security of lives and properties in the Nigerian society and the society, in turn, stands a greater chance of being economically, socially, politically as well as culturally developed, if the agents of development such as the media and their operators/professionals diligently and dispassionately carry out their responsibilities. Towards this end, the media in Nigeria, both print and broadcast, is encouraged to engage in more interpretational and investigative reportage of issues for national development.