Jos Journal of Media & Communication Studies
September, 2014 - Vol. 1 : No. 2
Department of Mass Communication, University of Jos.

Influence of Elite Journalism Practice on Socio-economic and Political Transformations of Society: An Analysis of The Times of London as a Global Elite Newspaper

By

Ashiekpe Aondowase James &
Francis Sunday Leman
Department of Mass Communication,
University of Jos

Introduction

Like other media of mass communication, newspapers function in society toinform, educate and entertain; a process through which it influences public opinion bycounseling, guiding and advising and persuading readers to toe certain lines of thoughtand carryout some desired actions. By so doing, newspapers play a crucial role of helping to preserve and transmitculture, shaping and fostering society's political ideals, refocusing socio-economic and political policies, and thereby transforming society. It is in recognition of these vital functions of newspapers insociety that the commission on freedom of the press as observed by Wolseley andCampbell (1957) in Jones (2009, p. 3) prescribed that newspapers (press) should serve as ameans of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in society with one another and a means of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of society adding that theyshould provide "a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.

Newspapers were the most powerful sources of information to the public before the advent of broadcasting, therefore, wielding enormous influence on all segments of society. As thefirst media of mass information dissemination, newspapers enlighten"the public, servicesthe political system and safeguards personal liberties. Krasner and Chaberski(1982, p. 264) notes that newspapers carried out surveillance on society or the environment, discusses threats andopportunities affecting the valued position of the community as well as the component partswith it. Emphasizing the importance of newspapers in society, Krasner and Chabeski(1983, p. 267) assert that James Madison, a one-timeAmerican president remarked that "it isthe newspaper that has made democracy possible", adding that "we should be able todefend and define its unique functions as a vital and indispensable medium of mass communication in a free civilization".

Inspite of the important functions of newspapers to society, they are noted to mostoften perform their functions in a dysfunctional manner to the peril of the society

ratherthan its advantage when acting under certain selfish interests. It is this dysfunctionalattitude of newspapers that have made them to be variously accused, attacked and severely criticized bymembers of the Nigerian public in recent time. Assessing the situation, Merrill (1968, p. 6) observes that "when oneglances about at the reading care offered by the newspapers generally and at thedisjointed manner in which it is presented, one would understand why astutepress criticsindict newspapers". According Merrill (1968), newspapers are criticized for being mainly inane sheets of gossip or instruments of national propaganda seeking to create barriers to understanding by presenting withoutinterpretation "unreal" and "alarmist" news without context of meaning and often withoutfollow-up.

Although this assertion came during the era classified in journalism history as 'junk or yellowjournalism'during which ethics were not given any regard and pecuniary interests of the papers and their publishers took centre stage, it is apparent that some newspapers in contemporary era are still guilty of this trend. Notwithstanding, even in the era of yellow journalism, some papers stocked to their definingideologies and practiced journalism with dignity and caution. Although few in numberthey have worked themselves unto the world scene as the elite press based ontheirintegrity and intelligence.*The Times* of London, still in circulation today is one of such papers that have stood their ground, and have come to be reckoned as the most renowned elite papers of the world. *The Times* of London throughout its existence have exerted enormous influence on the socio-economic and political transformations of society.

The Paucity of the Elite Press

Elite press as observed by Merrill (1968, p. 7), are a group of small but seriousnewspapers whose standards of editorial practice are conditioned more by an intellectualorientation and an idealistic vision than by a desire for mammoth circulation orimpressive profits. Merrill (1968) notes that although the elite newspapers are serious in tone andlacking in flippancy so common in journalism, they are really optimistic papers; theyoffer the invitation to consider the ideas hopefully and critically, to dissect issues and tosolve problems.Justifying his description of elite papers, Merrill (1968, p. 8) stated that "if they were notbasically optimistic, they would not take serious things so seriously". The elitenewspapers in effect say to the reader; "let us reason together, let us be calm andrational".The criteria for determining which of the world's newspapers rank among the elitecan be as varied as the purposes or the individuals who have undertaken the evaluationtask and the period during which the evaluation was done (Gross, 2005, p. 3).

Notwithstanding his commentary on classification of elite newspapers, Gross(2005) totally accepts criteria used by Merrill (1968) and states that elite papers must be associated with seriousness of tone, influence among world leaders, linguistic sophistication andexemplars for other journalists, while showing high concern for culture. Corroborating this position,Fisk (2005, p. 116) noted that credibility, breadth of coverage, reliability and accuracy of information, depth of reporting,informed analysis and a high sense of responsibilitypredicated on editorial freedom are core values of elite newspapers. In aconfirmatory study of newspapers classified as elites in 1968, Merrill (1999) in Valdiva(2003, p. 11) notes that although worldwide desert of mass, too often crass newspaper mediocrity exists, anoasis of thoughtful

international newspapers thrive. According to Valdiva (2003),"these global-elite newspapers offerreaders responsible, in-depth content" and "they help shape the world view of otherjournalists, politicians, academicians and an assortment of opinion leaders by presentingthe world as a single, interconnected entity.

Valdiva (2003, p. 12) observes that although struggling against great odds, elite newspapers have stood the test of time and have remained serious newspapersinterested in international undercurrents of similarity, not differences in their world view. The elite newspapers appeal to thought and logic, not to prejudices and emotion. This implies that elitenewspapers, regardless of their place of publication or language are relatives of one anotherand are interested in solidifying the world through discourse of ideas and issues, not infurther splintering it with mere facts. That is, when facts are put into perspective andanalyzedcritically and intelligibly, they evolve ideas and issues that could be discussed and resolved tosociety's advantage. However, by mere statement of facts without careful analysis tosubstantiate the issues embedded in the facts, such facts could develop into conflicts andprobable crisis.

It is against this background that Gross (2005, p. 4) stated that the elite newspaper's reputation has not been built on sensationalism or prurience but on the quality,intelligent,serious and knowledgeable reports offered the reader with a fundamental sense of socialresponsibility that celebrates basic human rights and advocates reasonable positionsirrespective of the paper's political leaning. Gross (2005) observes that world leaders show greatconcern about the daily utterances in global elite papers because elite papers serve aleadership role in society. Emphasizing the seriousness with which world leaders take theelite newspapers, Adebanwi (2004, p. 765) citing a survey conducted by Brown (1999) observed that hardly do world leadersgo to bed without reading at least an article from the elite newspapers. This underscoresthe statement of Merrill (1968, p. 7) that "elite newspapers are the papers which serious people andopinion leaders in all countries of the world take seriously".

The Times of London as an Elite Newspaper

Founded by John Walter on January 1, 1785 as "The Daily Universal Register" the paper adopted its famous name - *TheTimes* of London three years after on January 1, 1788, publishing commercial news and notices along with somescandal. Acknowledged as one of the world's greatest newspapers and one of Britain's oldest and most influential newspapers of all times, *TheTimes* of London earned its reputation through hard work, dedication and integrity. Explaining why the newspaper is famous, O'Sullivan, Dutton and Rayner (1998, p. 21) noted that "*The Times* is a dignified, politeuncluttered and well edited newspaper, with excellent writingand editorials that are highlypolished and deceptively sharp. This corroborates the acknowledgement of the astute nature of *The Times* of London by Merrill(1968, p. 171) that:

> It has ever stood in the highest journalistic circles of the world, and despite certainweaknesseswhich critics have always delighted in pointing out, it is perhaps the newspaper which most readily comes to mind whenthoughts turn to quality daily journalism.

It is a commonplace to suggest that the mass media provide their audiences with a 'map' of the social and political world beyond their own immediate

experience. From this observation about contemporary complex society, flow other notions of media power: *agenda setting* (media capacity to focus public attention on some events and issues, and away from others); the *spiral of silence* (the withering of issues and perspectives ignored by media); *priming* (media ability to influence citizens' criteria of political evaluation); *cultivation* (the gradual adoption of beliefs about the social world that correspond to television's selective picture of the world), *framing*, and the *'ideological effect'* (the production of meaning in the service of domination) (Temple, 2008, p. 30-31). Through these processes, certain news media outlets or organisations have such as*The Times* of London have made their imprint on the conscience of society, wielding influence and power.

Operating under various ownership structures and societal frontiers, most media organisations or outlets such as newspapers often implicitly or explicitly compromise on their values. Such media outfits as a result often get entangled in controversies by getting involved in issues that question their professional stance and integrity as well as their societal watchdog functions. This explains why Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, p. 23) argue, that "whether one looks back three hundred years, and even three thousand, it is impossible to separate news from community, and over time, even more specifically from democratic community." However, if, as Hartley (1996) puts it, journalism is the primary sense-making practice of modernity, what kind of modernity does it make when its integrity becomes compromised or put to question? This is because as Hartley (1996, p. 12) points out, the consensually preferred way of achieving journalism's classical role in society is through monitoring of bureaucracy, industries, and the state as modernity's key institutions from a slightly elevated or professionally distant vantage point. It is what scholars and news workers alike tend to describe as "hard" news — the reporting of which is considered the apex of journalism's informal hierarchy.

Presumably, *The Times* of London has lived up to this bidding of political and economic news forge that reinforces the foundations of social organization in society. As self-proclaimed gatekeepers, newspapers that do not subscribe to elitism remain shallowly focused on facts and their journalists have only their occupational ideology and news culture to rely on as a defence against either commercial intrusion or special interests (Deuze, 2005). In doing so, non-elite journalism's representation of society tends to stay the same while it simultaneously reports on a rapidly changing world. In combination with a professional preferential treatment of facts, none-elite newspapers end up representing, and thereby reproducing, existing power formations and institutionalized relationships in society — relationships that inevitably prescribe an essential mediating role to professional journalism as society's "glue" or "social cement" (Aldridge andEvetts, 2003; Meijer, 2001).

It is because *The Times* of London have been able to sustain its stance on critical thought and analysis of issues to the benefit of society irrespective of the interests at stake that it is today reckoned and revered as one of the world's greatest global elite newspaper. This did not however, come without challenges and some hard knocks. *The Times* has throughout the lifespan of its existence at various times faced financial and other challenges which caused the quality and reputation of its editorial writing to vary,though it continued to maintain high standards of reporting and accuracy.Belof (2005, p. 1) notes the numerous challenges that have plagued paper to include dwindling financial fortunes, incessant ownership and management

changes, criticisms and controversies.

In spite of the challenges, *The Times* as noted by Merrill (1968, p. 171) has won innumerable honours andawards for its quality journalism. One of these numerous awards and honours and onewhich Merrill says expresses the typical worldwide reaction to the paper, was theHonour Award for Distinguished Journalism given *The Times* in 1933 by the Universityof Missouri School or Journalism. According to Merrill (1968), the newspaper was commended for itsimpartiality and its learningcourage, as well as its incorruptible English honour. *The Times*was also praised for itscompleteness and accuracy, its urbane and cultural editorial page. It was also commendedfor its polished special articles, its excellent financial reviews and its world outlook.Another significant honour followed in 1952 from the same institution and described *The Times* as"sedate, unsensational, well-mannered, impeccably turned out" and standing forthe "sober, phlegmatic, matter-of-fact side of the British character" (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003, p. 549).

Explaining what gave *The Times* a credible image among the world elitenewspapers, Merrill (1968) in Balnaves,Mayrhofer and Shoesmith (2004, p. 194) quoting a German journalist notes that in its traditionalinsistence on truth and careful reporting, *The Times:*

> Prefers to wait twenty-four hoursand to bebeaten by competitors, rather than publish adoubtful report. It has its reward: at homeandabroad a *Times* report isconsidered correct untilthe opposite is proved. My personalten years' experience ascorrespondent in London hasshown me how rarely *The Times*is in error.

Long considered the United Kingdom's newspaper of record, *The Times* isgenerally viewed as a serious publication with high standards of journalism. As noted byPfanner (2003, p. 2), although *The Times* have diversified to satisfy all categories of Britishcitizens, "it has an image of the day and a modem morals status".

Despite its growing image, earned from astute journalism practice, *The Times* isalso associated with challenges that have made critics regard the paper as controversial.As observed by Merrill (1968, p. 172), in other events of the nineteenth century, the paperopposed popular calls for the repeal of certain laws until the number of demonstrations convinced the editorial board otherwise. Also, thepaper objected and later, only reluctantly supportedaid to victims of the Irish Potato famine. During the American Civil War too, *The Times*represented the views of the wealthy classes, favouring the secessionists, but it was not asupporter of slavery.

These instances and the financial misfortunes that rocked the paper mired itin alot of controversies. *The Times* which was known as the 'Thunderer' was to be referred asthe 'Whimperer as a result of the controversies. Belof (2005, p. 3) notes that others including employees of *The Times* feelit has gone down market since being acquired by Murdoch, citing its coverage ofcelebrities as evidence.Although this increased coverage or/and emphasis on celebrityand sports-related news is rarely given prominence on the front page, *The Times* is notwithout trenchant critics. For instance, Robert Fisk seven times British InternationalJournalist of the year, resigned as foreign correspondent in 1988 over what he saw aspolitical censorship of his article on the shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 in July ofthat year.

Inspite of these odds against the paper, *The Times* has been able to maintain focusin intelligent, knowledgeable, accurate and well-articulated facts in its

operations. It isagainst this backdrop that although himself a critic of the paper, Brown (1999, p. 16) notedthat *The Times* is still a paper of the establishment, the government, the nobility, theruling-class "but it is definitely independent and not a conservative spokesman as it isoften accused of being". This reinforces the view of Merrill (1968, p. 176) who quoted SirWilliam as saying the paper is ideologically "in the centre" and that it is designed for the"intelligent readers of all classes".

Influence of *TheTimes* on Journalism, Politics, Economic and Social Life of Society

Society is both the source and end destination of news, in such a way that journalism is inevitably involved in the exercise of power and not just the power of governments, propagandists and advertisers.The often cited or alleged 'power of the press' lies in the many consequences sought or experienced by both 'senders' and 'receivers' of news, especially when effects relate to issues of public importance. In this context, 'power' can only mean 'influence' and persuasion, since information cannot in itself coerce. Sometimes the apparent power is a simple consequence of the volume of publicity, with no intention of influence involved. All agencies that operate in the public sphere are vulnerable to reactive effects caused by information circulated publicly and outside their own control.

The capacity to have influence stems from certain general circumstances of the operation of the press. According to Downie and Kaiser (2002), primary amongst these are: the de facto ability to 'control the gates' of communication to the public at large, deciding who and what will receive varying amounts of publicity; some control over the quality of this publicity – whether positive or negative; the dependence of many institutions of society on the news media as their main channel to the public but also the window through which they are themselves routinely perceived. The effects at issue relate to public behaviour stimulated by news, or to attitudes and opinions formed on the basis of news information. The news media can affect choices in matters of consumption, voting and public reputation, whether intentionally or not. We should keep in mind, however, that the 'power of the press' is not an intrinsic property of the media, but largely the outcome of forces at work in the society that are mediated by way of the media.

Aside from sheer reach, it depends on the degree of trust and respect accorded by the public to media sources. Whatever type or degree of power that can be attributed to the press, the situation of general dependence on flows of public information inevitably raises issues of the rights and responsibilities of journalists and leads to demands for accountability. Social theory of the press (ideas of what journalism ought or ought not to do) flows quite directly from the links of purpose, cause and effect that have been indicated.As it has been through the years, *The Times* today is recognized as one of thegreatest newspapers of the world because of its exercise of enormous influence onjournalism practice, politics, the economy and social life, not only in the United Kingdom but elsewhere around the world.

The relationship between newspapers, politics and the marketplace is a complex and broad matter. It is however, on record that before the advent of yellow journalism, the press was dominated by the professional political reporting of *The Times* of London (O' Malley, 2002, p. 156). Holding pretensions to enlighten and inform its elite reader, *The Times* embodied ideals of the press as the 'fourth estate',

aiming to inform public opinion by acting as an indispensible and independent link between the national institutions of the legislature, judiciary and the executive. Notwithstanding, repeal of stamp duty in Britain coupled with developments in technology and society all served to end the dominance of *The Times* of London as other newspapers sprang up in equal measures (Stöber, 2004, 24).

Accordingto Merrill (1968, p. 176), *The Times* of London irrespective of the new entrants into the field remained respected and appreciated for its thoroughness in newscoverage. Although it is highlyselective compared to other quality papers, it has oftenshown remarkable foresight in seeing the future importance of an event and hasrecognized the importance of ideas long before "newsworthy" activities emerged fromthem. With this background and the paper's thoughtful and interpretative articlescoupled with its calm and rational discourse, *The Times* has championed the cause ofinvestigative, intuitive and interpretative journalism (Fisk, 2005, p. 210). According to Fisk (2005), *TheTimes* was the first newspaper to send war correspondents to cover particular conflictsand since then, war orconflict reporting is taken seriously by all media organizationsaround the world. William Howard Russell, the first war correspondent in the worldduring the Crimean War, was immensely influential with his dispatches back to England.As Fisk notes, Russell's critical reports of British management of the Crimean Warhelped bring down the cabinet in 1855 and led to a needed Army reorganization.

The Times is known to wield a lot of political influence in Britain. It is in this lightthat Brown (1999, p. 1**)** declared that "English people participate in the government of theircountry by reading *The Times* ". Brown (1999) refers to *The Times* as self-government of the Britishpeople noting that much of what constitutes Britain's foreign policy is shaped by *TheTimes.*Little wonder then that Merrill (1968, p. 174) declared that the United Kingdom hastwo ambassadors in each world capital, "one sent by the Queen and another by *The Times*of London newspaper".Another significant influence of *The Times* on politics is in 1932 when thepaper enthusiastically supported the Great Reform Bill which reduced corruption andincreased the electorate from 400,000 to 800,000 people. This feat began the fight against corruption around the world.

On the journalism front, thepaper in June 1990, ceased its policy of using courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss prefixes forliving persons) before full names on first reference, but it continues to use them beforesurnames on subsequent references, confining the more formal stage to the "court andsocial" page. Since *The Times* introduced this change, other newspapers around the worldhave followed suit, and today, it has become the editorial standard for most media organisations throughout the world. On the ethical plane, a former KGB officer, Mr. Lebedev who was a financier ofthe paper wanted to buy it over when the paper was undergoing financial extinction butthe editorial board was suspicious that he would influence the editorial content based onless evidence of Mr. Lebedev's hands-off approach in his other Russian newspaperventure, the *Moscow Korrespondent;* and therefore frustrated his efforts. Commenting onthe stance of the editorial board, Fisk (2005, p. 5) retorted that this is “the paper's infusion into British journalism ofthe idea that a newspaper was independent,responsible to public opinion and not to thegovernment or owners”.

Conclusion

Analysis of the of *The Times*of London as a global elite newspaper indicates that although the monopoly of the paper was broken by new entrants, it never lost focus and nonetheless became the standard gauge for other papers. This has made of *The Times*of Londontill date to remain influential, serving as a reference point for elite journalism practice. Also, the economic necessity of the 'quality' press to survive in an expanding market along with the aspiration of their journalists to be part of the political system led to a reliance of the new entrants on subsidy from political parties. Such a relationship rendered the newspapers as historic sources to be loaded with affiliation and ideological agendas. There was a clear conflict of interest that led some to assert that a newspapers as the 'fourth estate' was a myth as its head was in politics and its feet in commerce. This situation still gave *The Times* an edge, maintaining its position as Britain's leading elite newspaper and one of the world's best.

It is evident from the analysis that despite several odds against *The Times* of London, the paper has been able to live above board, establishing itself as an influential medium that cannot be ignored. It has demonstrated very clearly that journalism thrives on hard word, truthfulness and accuracy in news reporting; and that editorial independence is the key to sound and intelligent journalism practice. Therefore it is important that the virtues which have made *The Times* an elite paper of record should be embraced by Nigerian newspapers in order to safeguard democracy and foster peace and progress through critical discourse of issues. This is against the backdrop of the often trivial, sensational and sentimental analysis of issues without reference to similar events in the past and projection of the implications for the future; leaving no room for learning and lessons thereof.

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