

## **History and the Press: A Case Study of Australia and Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*The circumstances of birth and the political setting contribute significantly to the nature, roles and effectiveness of a mass medium. The birth of the Nigerian press, in an era of contentious colonial rule and heightened missionary activity, for example, produced newspapers that were essentially a combative and indomitable anti-colonial force. Furthermore, the Nigerian press was propelled by historical circumstances to become a strong but improbable supporter of military rule until 1998 when it began to promote democracy. Although Australia was, like Nigeria, a British colony, its history had a different effect on the growth, values and direction of its press. The paper will argue that the significant similarities and differences between the Australian and the Nigerian journalism can be attributed to the history of the press in these countries.*

Despite Australia's prosperity, the age of the country and its newspapers, its technological and economic advantage and its ideal "multi-party parliamentary government, its protection of law and a firm basis in private enterprise" (Hachten 1971: 46), the Australian press lacks the force and influence of the press in so-called third-world countries, such as Nigeria.

There are many reasons and rewards for comparing the press in Nigeria and Australia. For one, they were both British colonies that achieved independence in the same century. Just as Australian independence from Great Britain took place earlier (1901), 59 years ahead of Nigeria (1960), both countries' print media were born in the nineteenth century, Australia much earlier in 1803 and Nigeria in 1859. Another reason is that this comparison may shatter some of the preconceptions and academic theories about press freedom. For the Western world, Nigeria's robust and ruthless press, which has in turn supported and tamed many a military dictatorship, is a confounding academic exclamation mark.

While in its first 41 years of independence by 2001, Nigeria was under military rule for 29 years and has had its democratic experiment disrupted a good number of times, Australia enjoyed a cohesive and structurally hitch-free democratic rule all through its 100 years of independence. For example, in Nigeria, hardly any administration, military or democratic, has assumed power or remained in power without the endorsement of the Nigerian press. But in Australia, apart from the media's universal agenda setting role, writes Burton, a Labor party spokesman on the media, there is "always room for debate about the actual effect which the media, and particularly newspapers, have on political events (Burton 1980:94).

To a large extent, the influence the media have on political events is determined by the relationship between the media and the government or the political leadership structures in the given country. Therefore, to grasp the differences between the media in Australia in Nigeria, it is important to compare the relationship between the press and the government in both countries. This is not an easy task.

Exploring the relationship between the government and the press in any country would require a full academic paper. But there are some indices and determinants of this relationship, principal among them: the level of freedom exercised by the press despite government restrictions, and the interest and participation of the public in political decisions, as well as the public's attitude towards press freedom. The premise of this approach is that every government, no matter how democratic or westernised, attempts to muffle the press or restrict media activity and content. Thus all governments have an uneasy relationship with the press. It is the outcome of this uneasy relationship and the public response to the media and to the relationship – rather than the scale of it – that determines its true nature.

Australia's considerably stable and cosy democracy ensures standards of governmental action and conduct, and a certain predictability and accountability. But because of frequent changes of government and the absence of a coherent and durable political and social agenda for most of the Nigeria's independent years, people rely on the media for decisions that affect their lives. Such decisions have included the appointment and dismissal of presidents, governors and ministers, the banning and unbanning of the importation of crucial goods, including medicines, the enactment and repeal of laws. And in the absence of a formal opposition, the press became the only advocate of the people, the only coherent group that would argue with or disagree with government actions and policies. And when the Nigerian government detains or attacks a journalist, people rise up in protest, and the society lionizes the journalist.

Nigerian journalism is therefore more relevant and critical to everyday life and to the public than the Australian journalism.

Having provided a framework for this contrast, this study will compare the history of the media of the two countries on three planes — circumstances of birth, relationship with colonial power and newspaper ownership. It will argue that the history of the press in Nigeria and Australia, perhaps much more than their political structures and socio-ideological and economic indices, determine the growth, values, direction, texture and influence of the press in these two countries. But it will also reason that the power of the Nigerian press has contributed immensely to the country's inability to sustain democratic rule.

### **Circumstances of Birth**

This section will look at the circumstances of the birth of Nigeria's first newspaper and Australia's first "white" and "black" or Aboriginal newspapers. For Australia, this distinction is essential because of the vast differences as well as the relevance and political and historical necessity of both brands of journalism in the Australian press.

The first Nigerian newspaper was *Iwe Iroyin*, published in the indigenous Yoruba language by a Reverend Henry Townsend, a Church Missionary Society. The paper's aim was to "educate" and convert the local people to Christianity. Three years later, in 1862 the first Bible in Yoruba rolled out of the missionary presses that produced the newspaper. The word of mortal journalists, by this awesome symbolic association, was thus to assume the force and infallibility of the Word of God. This association persuaded the Nigerian newspaper audience, perhaps unwittingly, to accept the message of journalism as the word of God, forcing Nigeria's first prime minister, a Moslem, to acknowledge improbably that when his people "read something in a newspaper, they take it as gospel" (Barton 1979:21).

But by 1891, riding in the crest of the invincibility of the written word, editors of the burgeoning and increasingly powerful Nigerian newspapers expressed their disenchantment with the church, portraying it as a "white interpretation of life". They called for a "native African church ... composed of natives, supported by natives and governed by natives (Barton 1979: 20). This savage independence marked the scorched-earth campaign for independence that the press was to successfully carry out and establish an indigenous federal independent government dominated by journalists. This independence struggle spearheaded

by the press had elements of racial agitation that do not feature in western British colonies like Australia – with a predominantly white and western population and culture coming in contact its kind.

It is surprising to many that the early newspaper in Australia, a British colony, was born as a lapdog unable to pursue the British press tradition described by Lloyd as “publication without prior restraint, which meant the right to publish without previous censorship or regulation” (Lloyd 1999: 10). The colony’s first newspaper, established in 1803 was known as the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, and was a government gazette published ‘by authority’ of the governor and under his direct control (Lloyd 1999: 11) and sought to please the government. The paper’s publisher was government printer and convict George Howe. The paper was printed on the government press, was subject to censorship and gave prominence to government notices. The paper’s “editor’s situation had been that of a mastiff to His Excellency” (Green 1936: 94). Howe accepted government censorship and ensured that the paper gave prominence to government notices (Conley 1999: 15).

Another publication with an interesting history was the Aboriginal or *Flinders Chronicle*, the first Aboriginal newspaper. It was established in 1836 (Rose 1996: xxix) by three Aboriginal clerks in the employ of and under the authority and whims of G. A. Robinson the white commandant of the Aboriginal settlement on Flinders Island. Its goal and driving force were, to quote the first edition of the paper, to “promote Christianity civilization (sic) and learning amongst the Aboriginal inhabitants” and to be a “brief but accurate register of events of the colony moral and religious” (Rose 1996: 3). The *Abo Call*, established two years later had a more political focus: “to present the case for Aboriginals from the point of view of the Aboriginals themselves”, raising its voice to “ask for Education, Equal Opportunity, and Full Citizen Rights” (Rose 1996: 23).

Expectedly, the Aboriginal journalistic ventures remained on the fringes, had little or no influence on the mainstream political agenda locally or nationally, and lived short lives. But it is interesting to note that it was an Aboriginal paper, and not the larger white early newspapers, that assumed an advocacy role while the Gazette was content to take orders from the authorities. There may be a simple explanation for this. A sense of injustice and oppression begets brave journalism, a journalism that screams out in favour of the underdog

The tepidity of the Australian media, situated in the context of its lacklustre and pro-establishment beginnings, explains what some scholars perceive as the enduring bias in the Australian press that confines itself to the interests and values of the middleclass and its own financial goals. Michel Courtney, one-time editor of the Tasmanian paper, the *Examiner*, had this to say of the motivation of the Australian press: "...the bias of the Australian press is inherently middle class and, in times of stress or alarm, conservative, especially where the newspaper's ability to survive financially appears to be threatened" (Courtney 1980: 75).

It is clear therefore that, while the Nigerian press served and gained the support of the masses that form the majority of the press and demanded radical change, the Australian press essentially looked after the society's elite that could benefit from, or at worst, tolerate the status quo. The focus and main constituency of the press in a way determined by the relationship the press fostered at its inception under colonial rule.

### **Relationship with the Colonial Power**

Lloyd (1999) maintains that "differences between colonies in governance and geography ensured that the reception of British press traditions varied in detail from colony to colony". It is therefore safe to say that the different colonial experiences resulted in substantial differences in the operation and ethos of the presses of the two countries. Critical differences in the relationship between the colonial government and a colony's press were the racial and democratic practices of the colonial power on the one hand, and the perception, enlightenment and the level of pride of the colonial subjects on the other.

In Nigeria, as in many African countries, the colonial administration made little effort to establish the legacy of western concepts of libertarian press freedom. Nor did the colonists, in their faulty perception of humanity, see the African blacks they colonised as equals. Journalists in Nigeria fought a war of independence and sought by practically every stroke of their pen, to reclaim the people's dignity and sovereignty. The press viewed itself as the unelected but people-backed opposition against the oppressive rule of black people by a white colonial master. On one of the many occasions that the colonial governor-general Lord Frederick Lugard, crossed the line of civility, in this case demanding that Nigerians prostrate before him, one of the newspapers, the fiery *Lagos Weekend Record* portrayed Lugard as someone who loved "brushing aside the amenities of civilized life; in fact some sort of an ogre" (Ekwelie 1971: 11). Lugard on his part was to dismiss the hard-hitting nationalistic

Nigerian journalists irritably as a bunch of missionary-educated villagers “interfering with native councils and acting as correspondents for a mendacious native press” (Barton 1979: 21)

In response, the British enacted a series of strong libel, criminal, licensing and contempt laws to censor the press. They shut down newspapers and arrested journalists. It was so bad that the *Weekend Record*, referring to the “distinctly unconstitutional and arbitrary” laws, wrote on January 10, 1910 that “the people dare not ... signify their displeasure without entailing the risk and penalty of the law of sedition”. Many of the laws the British used to bully the Nigerian press had been in operation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and subsequently abolished in Britain by the time the British press was born in 1662. So Hebert Macaulay, a Nigerian journalist and frontline politician referred to attempts by the British colonial administration to enact laws making “editors ... talk platitudes or indulge in fulsome adulation of government officials” as the “the worst kind of slavery: the bondage of the mind” (Akinfeleye 1988: 141)

Because the journalists were fighting a cause that was shared by the people — for the overthrow of the oppressive, foreign power — reporters arrested by the colonial administration became instant heroes. To undermine this heroism, the colonial government reluctantly ignored much of the press criticism. A humiliated colonial administration was to set up its own newspaper, the *Eastern Nigeria Outlook and Cameroon Star* to shield itself from attacks and to hit back at critics.

On the country’s independence in 1960, the pulse and goals of Nigerian journalism were to change from aggressive nationalism to a populist grass-root activism combined with the fight against post-colonial corruption.

In Australia the newspaper’s beginnings are marked by government control of newspaper publishing, complemented by a “brutal penal system” and heightened by a general reluctance of journalists to fight for press freedom. As Lloyd put it: "In the early Australian press, there were initially prior restraints of publication through the power of the governors. Australia’s first established newspapers were ‘by authority’" (Lloyd op cit:11). That means that the press and public in Australia acquiesced to colonial control of the mass media. In Nigeria, the newspapers from the inception were anti-authority. Government-endorsed and government-owned newspapers were boycotted or ridiculed.

Interestingly, when William Charles Wenworth and Robert Wardell, two lawyers with a passion for journalism, returned to Australia from Britain to set up an independent newspaper, *The Australian* in Sydney in 1824, New South Wales governor, Sir Thomas Brisbane expressed shock that the newspaper was established without his permission. His wrath was only curtailed by a recent charter of justice preventing the governor from preventing publication without going to Council (Lloyd 1999: 13).

It is important to note that it was the legislative system, apparently programmed fortuitously by the British legal system, and not agitation by journalists, that secured these benign elements of freedom for the Australian press. Even then, these puny concessions of freedom for the press “did not prevent the governors from invoking the powers of the law ... against recalcitrant editors”, wrote Lloyd. Despite the protection the law offered journalists, Governor Brisbane’s successor, Ralph Darling, for example, availed himself of criminal and common laws of libel and sedition to harass newspaper owners and editors and jail reporters.

There is hardly any evidence, from the studies on the Australian press history, that newspaper publishers or journalists challenged the excesses and verdicts of governments that oppressed. What could pass as a benign resistance to a government established or endorsed press was the establishment of non-government-sponsored newspapers. A lot of the persecution went on with little or no serious challenge. Little wonder then that in May 1942, Australia’s two Houses of Parliament went to the extent of imposing a ban on reporters from three newspapers – the *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Perth Sunday Times* – following an article satirising members of the Senate in the *Sunday Telegraph*. *The Telegraph* was “ordered to apologise before the journalists were readmitted” (Petersen 1993: 188). And William Clarke, the solicitor and landowner who pitched his newspaper, the *Swan River Guardian* against what Lloyd called “the strongest press in the colony,” and government mouthpiece, the *Perth Gazette* could not survive “the repressive stratagems” of the government which forced the precipitated the paper’s death after only two years of circulation, in 1838.

The assertion of Arthur Lyon, editor and owner of the *Courier*, in Brisbane, celebrating colonialism highlights the ideological dichotomy between the colonial press in Nigeria and Australia. Lyon wrote of his paper: “We have often dwelt with interest and delight on the recorded toils and triumphs of early colonisation – the struggles and sufferings of those who, in seeking to extend the blessings of civilisation, have enlarged the limits of British dominion

and heightened the lustre of the English name"(Cryle 1989: 7). Lyon illustrates that newspaper owners cherished their connection to the British colonial power. This was partially because many of the settlers who constituted the mainstream of the Australian public, were themselves British and considered colonial rule as an extension of their British heritage and governance. The case was different in Nigeria whose citizens belonged to African empires disrupted and disoriented by British colonial incursion. Because newspaper owners influence the approach and philosophy of their newspapers, their relationship with and perceptions of the colonial administration at the time, newspaper ownership structures play an important role in the determination of the differences between journalistic practice and influence in the two countries.

### **Newspaper Ownership**

One of the most telling contrasts between the press in Nigeria and Australia, in the context of the history of the press, is newspaper ownership. We will look at two dimensions of this ownership, namely: the spread of ownership and the influence of newspaper proprietors.

The early Nigerian newspaper was in the hands of individuals or small organizations. The first newspaper, *Iwe Irohin*, funded by a relatively small Christian mission was to be joined by a large collection of about 100 low-budget newspapers owned by journalists, politicians and ordinary folk. Nervous colonial officials dismissed many early Nigerian newspapers, with their rickety financial frameworks, as "a few rabble-rousing sheets cranked out on broken down hand presses" (Barton 1979: 20). The only notable publisher of many titles was Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, politician, nationalist and journalist who used his chain of regional newspapers as the platform for his political and ideological pursuits. Some of his newspapers were: *The Eastern Nigerian Guardian*, *The Nigerian Spokesman*, *The Southern Nigerian Defender*, *The Comet*, *The Advocate*, *The West African Pilot*, and others.

In the colonial era, few ideological disparities existed between proprietor and reporter. The anti-colonialist spirit raved in editor, publisher and reporter alike. And the motto then was publish and be damned – a motto that both owner and workers shared. Thus the question of editorial interference did not appear to arise at that stage. But after independence, with a large government run by Nigerians, and access to wealth, big publishers emerged, among them political parties. But publications owned by political interests have a high mortality rate in Nigeria. Often there were clashes between the publishers and their editors and reporters. For

example, many senior editors left the *Concord* group of newspaper between 1984 and 1985 to form their own national newspapers and magazines, when they disagreed with the publisher, Moshood Abiola over editorial independence.

Many of Nigeria's major publications were born this way and are published and managed by journalists. Among the newspapers are *ThisDay* (an influential national daily), *Vanguard*, and *PM News*. The magazines are *Newswatch* (a highly regarded weekly newsmagazine), *TheWeek*, *The News*, *Tell*, and a host of others in Nigeria and abroad. When millionaire publishers make too much demands on journalists, the independent newspapers, some of them struggling financially, are ever so ready to absorb them. Even the millionaire newspaper proprietors hardly ever succeed in directly dictating the political tune of their newspapers. Alex Ibru, publisher of Nigeria's most respected paper, *The Guardian*, gave his editors and managers that he would not take part in partisan politics. And when he was appointed minister in a military regime, *The Guardian* remained so independent of the publisher and so critical of the regime of General Sani Abacha that the government allegedly sent its agents to burn down the *Guardian* building and assassinate the Minister of Internal Affairs – Alex Ibru. Senior military officers have confessed to the court their roles in the operations.

The government is one of the biggest publishers in Nigeria. The federal government owns two national newspapers – a lesson gleaned from the colonial administration – and most state governments have their own media organ which all run at a financial loss. Both federal newspapers, *The Daily Times* and *The New Nigerian* are in the red. Besides, except for state or federal governments, with their weak and generally reviled publications, no two major newspapers in Nigeria is owned by the same individual or group. Anyone from businessmen, journalists, states to ordinary individuals own media outlets.

In Australia media ownership is concentrated in a few hands. John Henningham, until recently professor of Journalism at the University of Queensland, notes that Australian journalism could be “a victim of the move towards oligarchy in the newspaper market”. Two newspaper chains, he observes, publish nearly “90 per cent of the national and metropolitan daily newspapers” (Henningham 1996: 206). Cryle another media scholar, notes that “one pattern of ownership that spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the longstanding control of leading metropolitan newspapers by individuals and families” (Cryle 1989: 5).

While this concentration of ownership may have many ramifications, the concern of this paper is what Petersen calls “the generally uncritical acceptance of newspaper proprietors as influential shapers of public opinion to be courted rather than challenged” (Petersen 1993: 54). Newspaper owners appear to have huge powers in society and over the editors and reporters. While newspapers are rarely told to write certain things, “you know what your paper wanted and what it didn’t want” (Petersen 1993: 72). In his book, Public Enemy: The Press, A. E. (Ernest) Mander, a former adviser to the NSW premier, Bertram Stevens, said proprietors in Australia understood fair play to consist of “censorship and suppression of news which might influence readers against the view or the interests of the proprietors”. These, he said, included colouring reports (Petersen 1993: 184). Don Whittington, Canberra political reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* said the owner of his newspaper, Frank Packer told him during the 1943 newspaper campaign: “I don’t care what you write about anyone else but I won’t have you critical of [Prime Minister] Menzies” (Whittington 1977: 87). But Packer ordered that any reporter covering Mr Curtin, Menzies’ opponent, “must criticise him” (p.189).

### **Conclusion: Power and Responsibility**

Drawing strength and influence from its history, the Nigerian press has claimed for itself a stature and a range of rights and privileges unknown in western democracies including Australia. This phenomenon has serious implications and lessons for media scholarship and practice.

It is not true that western libertarian democracy necessarily breeds a free and influential press. For the press to be truly free and powerful, it must align itself with the aspirations and needs of the people, irrespective of the political or ideological framework. In other words, conditional or vague freedoms enjoyed by the western media may make them appear free. But such freedom is cosmetic because it serves a very limited public function, and enjoys little public trust. We have seen that, in effect, the absence of an enduring culture of western democracy can, in fact, make journalism an influential and critical part of daily life. Beyond that, we have also seen that relationship with the government, circumstances of birth and orientations of the publisher, combined, can determine the power and effectiveness of the press. In the end, the effectiveness of the press is not determined by the willingness of the government to accord it freedoms, but on the ability of the press to gain public trust and reliance, as well as the ability of the press to effectively challenge censorship.

But although the history of the Nigerian press and its roles in contemporary Nigerian affairs accidentally single it out as a heroic phenomenon of the press under constant attack, nowhere else has a press that thrives on the fruit of democracy worked so hard against democracy. The greatest and most successful supporter of military rule—outside the Nigerian Armed Forces—has been the Nigerian press. The choice for the military as preferred leaders of the oil-rich nation was easy but foolish.

With such a raging love for military dictatorships, it was little surprise that soon after Nigeria's first democratically elected executive president, Mr Shagari was sworn in, the press campaigned for his overthrow. Perhaps the Nigerian press has grown too powerful and too egocentric. The levels and implications of the collusion between the press and the evil forces of dictatorship would make a fascinating topic for future research.

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