

PRODUCING IMPACTFUL MEDIA PRODUCT: FEATURE, COMMENTARIES AND EDITORIAL WRITING.

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April 26-27, 2018.

PREFACE:

Since we are dealing with practitioners, we do not need to deal with basics. I am persuaded that we just need to encourage ourselves to be a bit more diligent in this “Information Age”. An expert in this area, Bruce, Loss-Larson had in 2004 sensitised us on the expediency of paying attention to the techniques of “writing for the information age”.

The reasons are not too far to seek: In the first place, today, a web of information is obtainable at the touch of a button. And here is the thing, while information is abundant, however, time is not. The challenge we hardly recognise is this: how we can present our material in a way that successfully grabs – and holds – the attention of our audience.

Besides, today’s impatient readers and viewers pay attention to telecasts and writing that engage them. Specifically, they pay attention only to writing that allows them to find quickly and easily what might be of interest. If you present them some garbage, they use their remote control to navigate away or drop the hard or electronic copy of our newspaper

An observation about content development in today's market:

- We should pause a bit to reflect on our attitude to this constant observation within the context of “impactful media product” in this business that is customer-centric. We often hear this narrative that the advent of social media nurtured by citizen journalism has affected the market of the traditional media. This argument is not so straight forward. The good news is that academic (research) journals are beginning to report too that there has been some resurgence and ‘bullishness’ in the print media in some jurisdictions such as the United States, Israel, India, United Kingdom, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, etc.

- For instance, robust features, commentaries and leader (editorial writing) on 'Trumpism' has triggered some revival in the print media industry in the United States. The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, etc are doing well in print and electronic versions. The NYT is said to be prospering under Mark Thompson, a British broadcaster and former director-general of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) who was headhunted by the management of the NYT in 2012 when its fortune was waning.
- Besides, a group of retired journalists who are now entrepreneurs who would like to publish a news magazine told me part of their market survey last year: that the Boston, Massachusetts-based Harvard Business Review published monthly by the Harvard University records better sales than most newspapers and magazines in Nigeria (every month).

- The survey also revealed that London-based ***The Economist*** and ***Time***, which hardly carry stories about us, are doing better than most of our local journals. This is very instructive. But the lesson here is that it is not because the journals and periodicals from the U.S and U.K, and even in Africa are doing well because they have devised better marketing communication strategy. They are doing well because they have had some **dynamic capabilities** in content development.
- This is the point: **content**, beginning from the cover or front pages is the key to success. Let's therefore note this from this discussion point today: that it is not quite accurate to claim all the time that we are not doing well in Nigeria because of the advent of the social media.

The Deliverables Here... Knowledge-based Journalism:

- At the core of what we are discussing now is what another expert in this area, Thomas E. Patterson, a Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at the Joan Shorestein Centre on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy's School of Government calls, **“the need for knowledge-based journalism”**.
- Following an extensive research, Patterson in a book *Informing The News* (2013) proposes, **‘Knowledge-based journalism’** as a corrective. He says unless today's journalists are more deeply informed about the subjects, they cover, they will continue to misinterpret them and to be vulnerable to manipulation by their sources. In the classic derived from a multi-year initiative of the Carnegie Corporation and the Knight Foundation, Patterson calls for nothing less than **“a major overhaul of journalism practice and education”**. The book speaks not only to journalists but to all who are concerned about the integrity of the information on which democracy depends.

The Deliverables Here... Knowledge- based Journalism:

- The word ‘corrective’ used in the synopsis above is based on classical notes of the an oracle, **Walter Lippman** who predicted nearly a century ago that democracy would falter, **“if there is no steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news”**.
- The publisher of the book says, “today’s journalists are not providing it (trustworthy news). There is an allegation that too often, reporters give equal weight to facts and biased opinion, stir up small controversies and substitute infotainment for real news. It is also alleged that even when they (reporters) get that facts right, they often misjudge the context in which they belong.

The Context:

- **INFORMATION IS THE LIFEBLOOD** of a healthy democracy. Public opinion and debate suffer when citizens are misinformed about current affairs, as is increasingly the case. Though the failures of today's communication system cannot be blamed solely on news media, they are part of the problem and the best hope for something better.
- What is more, Dr. Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York who inspired Patterson's book raises the bar of this discussion as quoted in an acknowledgement of the work when he says, "**journalists cannot meet democracy's needs unless they become 'knowledge professionals' who have, mastery of not only technique but also of content**".

- The key issue I would like us to underline here is that in this Information Age, we need to take the issue of business aspect of journalism very seriously. I do not mean **‘financial journalism’** here. I am talking about journalism as a business. I believe I am talking to middle managers in the news media here. Many of you are already line editors and deputy editors. What I want us to take away is that we should take advantage of the virtual learning environment to study business management as we move from **newsroom to boardroom: Reason?** When we study today’s business operating environment, we will discover that **there is some nexus between the quality of content we produce (through features, commentaries and editorials) and commercial success.** It has little or nothing to do with quality of advert managers and canvassers. Note this: when we fail to produce relevant content that the customers cherish at all times, the brand equity will drop and revenue will suffer. If poor content development is nurtured by mediocre management we find in the industry here, the last resort and the killer punch is the pollutant called **“Media Awards”** to news sources. We often hear of **‘Governor of the Year’, Banker of the Year, ‘Economic Manager of the Year’, ‘Outstanding Governor of the Year’,** etc. This is a sign of economic recession in the industry.

- When our publishers and professional bodies begin to organise awards to “thieves of state”, those who are responsible for the way we are, we are courting extinction. Nothing destroys news media market more than awards to news sources. The award winners who step forwards to receive awards always pay for them, except some such as ‘**Life-Time Achievement Award**’ the organizers always insert as a veneer to distract attention from the pollutant. Whenever we fill the front pages and prime time with photographs and images of the so-called award winners who are well known to our readers and audience, do we reckon with perception index of the customers? What kind of content development is that?
- **I have not come here to teach you how to write reports and commentaries and even editorials.** These are things so many of us are already doing. All we need to tell ourselves is this: **though we are not lazy journalists, we need to begin to raise the bar of content development through quality stories and research to enhance them.**

- Customers in politics and business need good pieces of information that feed democracy and commerce. They want to plan with intelligence gathered in the news media. They need to read very deep and analytical columns, opinions and editorials of some oracles and newspapers. We are beginning to lag behind, in this regard. **Instead of covering events and even tragic occurrences, we are covering up these stories as consultants to these scoundrels in power.**
- Incredibly at the moment, the National Secretariat of the **Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) and all chapters and chapels are on what they call “Media Tour for Good Governance”**. They are going to tour projects in all the states of the federation most people would like to restructure because it is not working. Certainly, the youth in our ‘dynamic’ NUJ are not lazy. However, it is doubtful that good journalism and quality content development will come out of the media tours that most governors will appreciate the tourists for. This is another brand of awards to the wasters that most governors have become.

Conclusion of the whole matter:

- In the main, there is a correlation between our poor performance in the market and poor journalism that we practise.
- We always tell truth to power. That is always our focal point. We need to reexamine our ways with journalism. It is more critical with the bulk of the stakeholders here. I am talking of those who cover the ENERGY DESK. These **special financial journalists have become the aristocracy of the Nigerian Press**. They cover the mainstay of the country's economy. Financial journalism is the heart of the profession. They (should) collect data in the age of the big data to tell their stories and ask questions about the extractive industry in local, global and 'glocal' context.
- What is more, the industry's focal point, the almighty NNPC is always in the eyes of the storm. There are always many questions to ask the state oil firm that would always excite of our customers. But curiously, stories about the NNPC always come from the National Assembly, the anti-graft agencies, statements and denials by the same oil corporation. Not many investigated stories even from the oil fields have emerged from energy reporters of recent.

Let's note the following:

- The story of oil subsidy or no oil subsidy in this dispensation was left hanging for more than two years before the National Assembly uncovered the existence of subsidy. Whatever happened to the energy reporters! Where were the energy editors then?
- NNPC as the sole importer of PMS, etc story lead did not come to light enough until the minister of state, petroleum admitted during a national assembly inquiry. Why didn't the energy reporters investigate such an award winning story in good features?
- Is the NNPC part of the TSA and why? People are still confused... What is the truth?
- Why have the highlights of regular audit reports of NEITI not been leads for further investigations by energy reporters?
- Why haven't questions been asked about the anti-graft agencies lack of interest in NEITI reports that have always implicated some subjects?
- Pioneer EFCC Chairman has been consistent in his claims that former president Goodluck Jonathan never allocated any oil blocks throughout his administration. Is the claim the truth and why?
- What is the state of the Petroleum Industry Governance Bill (PIGB) passed so far? What is the content? These are still not been followed up diligently.

Defining Excellent Writing:

- Although excellence is difficult to define, we can also recognize mediocrity when we read bad copies and listen to average presenters. In the same vein, we can always find excellence in award winning articles both at home and abroad. In modern journalism, there is just a thin line between news and features. In this regard, a good news item just broken in the social media is expected to appear the following day or later in the day broken down (breaking news to broken down (news) feature. We need to note the following ingredients in this regard. To break down breaking news, features writer need three things:
 - Document – need to be document-minded;
 - More desk research on the subject;
 - Possible interviews (of experts) and sources.
 - There are no dull subjects. There are dull reporters who cannot look and keep documents and do more research and interviews.
 - What is missing here too: **Reading habit.**

Editorial Writing As Road Less Taken

- *Characteristics of Editorial Writing*

An editorial is an article that presents the newspaper's opinion on an issue. It reflects the majority vote of the editorial board, the governing body of the newspaper made up of editors and business managers.

- It is usually unsigned. Much in the same manner of a lawyer, editorial writers build on an argument and try to persuade readers to think the same way they do. Editorials are meant to influence public opinion, promote critical thinking, and sometimes cause people to take action on an issue. In essence, an editorial is an opinionated news story.

Editorials have:

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1. Introduction, body and conclusion like other news stories;
2. An objective explanation of the issue, especially complex issues;
3. A timely news angle;
4. Opinions from the opposing viewpoint that refute directly the same issues the writer addresses;
5. The opinions of the writer delivered in a professional manner. Good editorials engage issues, not personalities and refrain from name-calling or other petty tactics of persuasion;
6. Alternative solutions to the problem or issue being criticized. Anyone can gripe about a problem, but a good editorial should take a pro-active approach to making the situation better by using constructive criticism and giving solutions;
7. A solid and concise conclusion that powerfully summarizes the writer's opinion. Give it some punch.

Four Types of Editorials Will:

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1. ***Explain or interpret:*** Editors often use these editorials to explain the way the newspaper covered a sensitive or controversial subject. School newspapers may explain new school rules or a particular student-body effort like a food drive.

2. ***Criticize:*** These editorials constructively criticize actions, decisions or situations while providing solutions to the problem identified. Immediate purpose is to get readers to see the problem, not the solution.

3. ***Persuade:*** Editorials of persuasion aim to immediately see the solution, not the problem. From the first paragraph, readers will be encouraged to take a specific, positive action. Political endorsements are good examples of editorials of persuasion.

4. ***Praise:*** These editorials commend people and organizations for something done well. They are not as common as the other three.

Writing an Editorial

- 1. Pick a significant topic that has a current news angle and would interest readers.
 2. Collect information and facts; include objective reporting; do research
 3. State your opinion briefly in the fashion of a thesis statement
 4. Explain the issue objectively as a reporter would and tell why this situation is important
 5. Give opposing viewpoint first with its quotations and facts
 6. Refute (reject) the other side and develop your case using facts, details, figures, quotations. Pick apart the other side's logic.
 7. Concede a point of the opposition — they must have some good points you can acknowledge that would make you look rational.
 8. Repeat key phrases to reinforce an idea into the reader's minds.
 9. Give a realistic solution(s) to the problem that goes beyond common knowledge. Encourage critical thinking and pro-active reaction.
 10. Wrap it up in a concluding punch that restates your opening remark (thesis statement).
 11. Keep it to 500 words; make every word count; never use "I"

A Sample Structure

I. Lead with an Objective Explanation of the Issue/Controversy.

Include the five W's and the H. (Members of Congress, in effort to reduce the budget, are looking to cut funding from public television. Hearings were held ...)

- Pull in facts and quotations from the sources which are relevant.
- Additional research may be necessary.

- ***II. Present Your Opposition First.***

As the writer you disagree with these viewpoints. Identify the people (specifically who oppose you. (Republicans feel that these cuts are necessary; other cable stations can pick them; only the rich watch public television.)

- Use facts and quotations to state objectively their opinions.
- Give a strong position of the opposition. You gain nothing in refuting a weak position.

- ***III. Directly Refute The Opposition's Beliefs.***
- You can begin your article with transition. (PDP believes public television is a "sandbox for the rich." However, statistics show most people who watch public television make less than N400,000 per year.)
- Pull in other facts and quotations from people who support your position.
- Concede a valid point of the opposition which will make you appear rational, one who has considered all the options (fiscal times are tough, and we can cut some of the funding for the arts; however, ...).

- ***IV. Give Other, Original Reasons/Analogies***
- In defense of your position, give reasons from strong to strongest order. (Taking money away from public television is robbing children of their education ...)
- Use a literary or cultural allusion that lends to your credibility and perceived intelligence (We should render unto Caesar that which belongs to him ...)

- **V. Conclude With Some Punch.**
- Give solutions to the problem or challenge the reader to be informed. (Congress should look to where real wastes exist — perhaps in defense and entitlements — to find ways to save money. Digging into public television's pocket hurts us all.)
- A quotation can be effective, especially if from a respected source
- A rhetorical question can be an effective concluder as well (If the government doesn't defend the interests of children, who will?)

Summary & Conclusion:

- We need to realize that without our good content from well researched stories, we will continue to struggle financially and then blame the social media. We no longer read good interviews from those who have some information to give to political and business leaders and the rest. We need to read and continue to read and read good books and journals. Good reporters should not be limited in understanding issues on our beats. We need to deepen our understanding of how the world of politics, diplomacy, business, art etc, works. We should to develop modern research skills and orientation. Besides, we have to read English language books written especially by the native speakers. We should not be too old to learn. We have a responsibility to discourage impurities in our system such as awards to news sources. We can only emulate Daily Trust's 'African of the Year' or CNN/MultiChoice 'African Journalists of the Year'. These organs reward winners who are not always prominent but significant.
- In the main, who ever cannot read, cannot lead and cannot write

- Thanks and God bless you for listening.