

UBE AND THE MASS MEDIA: STRIKING A 'GOLD' ACCORD

BY

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I.S. POPOOLA

Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lagos,
Akoka - Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria.

Tel: GSM 08023405801

E-mail: tayonigeria@yahoo.com

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1.0 ABSTRACT

"The basic goal of the media is fact-finding and fact-giving", so quipped renowned communication scholar, Alfred E. Opubor. In other words, it is the statutory duty of the mass media, as trustee of the public, to determine what is, and saying that it is; and saying so publicly.

The question to them ask is: Could this be said to be what the mass media in the country have been doing with regard to the implementation of the Universal Basic Education Programme (UBE)?

What should be the role of the mass media in a democratic, multi-party Federal State like Nigeria, where the goal of some state authorities under the control of another political party whose goals are at variance with that of the government at the centre is to thwart and frustrate the implementation of federal programmes designed to uplift the people?

This is the trust of this paper. To dissect the role of the mass media in the implementation of the UBE scheme thus far and prescribe how the media could strike a 'golden' accord with federal authorities in order that the lofty objectives of the scheme could be realized.

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The study is to be carried out through Content Analysis method of conducting research.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Education is a light to every human being. Just as it's practically inescapable to avoid having contact with light in our day-to-day activities, in the same way, education remains an inescapable path to human greatness. This explains why it is often said that an educated nation is a wealthy nation.

Nigeria is still by and large a country with a large proportion of illiterate population. The Federal Office of statistics (FOS) in a recent study revealed that 33.6 percent of the children ages 6-11 never attended primary school¹. In addition, education statistics for 1996 showed that only 14.1 million children were enrolled in primary school out of the 21 million children of school going-age².

Apart from various literacy programmes of several states of the federation put together to address the problem, the current Peoples. Democratic Party (PDP) led Federal Government believes in tackling the problem from the grassroots and thus introduced the Universal Basic Education programme (UBE) with its official launching by President Olusegun Obasanjo on 30th September, 1999.

To some analysts, the UBE is a re-incarnation of the defunct Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo when he was in the Saddle as military Head of State between 1976 and 1979. Whether it is seen as a new wine in old bottle or new wine in a new bottle, the fact remains that the UBE scheme reflects the thinking and concern of a Nigerian leader to secure a good future for Nigerian children, our leaders of tomorrow.

What are the objectives of the UBE? How has the Mass Media carry out their traditional functions with regard to the UBE? How could the Mass Media help in the attainment of the

lofty objectives of UBE? These are some of the issues thrashed in this paper. The paper has a heroic mission of advocating a golden accord between the UBE scheme and the Mass Media.

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1.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

i **MASS MEDIA:** Leading authorities in the field of Mass Communication had at one time or the other variously conceptualized the Mass Media. According to Uyo 1987:1 "the Mass Media are the engine of Mass Communication³. Thus, in the context of Uyo, the various avenues through which an undifferentiated set of people could be reached at any point in time through a complex mechanical device, both print and electronic are the organisations involved when we talk about the Mass Media.

In the words of Akinfeleye 1988:89 "Mass Media simply refer to the print Media. That is, the newspapers, magazines, newsletters etc. it also refer to the radio, television, cinematography and flim⁴

ii **UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION:** Fondly referred to by its acronym- UBE, the Universal Basic Education scheme remains the most ambitious scheme of any government of the federation since independence with a heroic mission to universalize access to basic education, engender a conducive learning environment and eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria within the shortest possible time.

Prior to the launching of the UBE scheme by President Olusegun Obasanjo on September 30th, 1999, the programme had existed at microscopic level in the country in the past. For instance, in 1952, the defunct Western Regional Government developed a UBE blue print, which took off in 1955. In 1954, the defunct Eastern Regional Government rolled out a programme of free primary education, which led to the implementation of its UPE scheme in 1957. In 1976, the programme was introduced in the Northern Region

Periscoping the various UPE schemes, Popoola 2001:222 states that:

All the regional and federal UPE schemes have similar goals, objectives, curriculum content and organizational arrangements similar to the newly introduced UBE scheme. In other words, the UBE is an extension of UPE⁵.

It is however instructive to note that while the UPE scheme was nationally introduced 26 years ago, primary education is yet to be free and compulsory for all Nigerian children.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF UBE SCHEME

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The implementation guidelines for the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme succinctly outlined the objectives of the scheme thus:

- To develop in the entire citizenry, a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment for its rigorous promotion.
- To provide free, Universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age.
- Reduce drastically, the incidence of dropout from the formal school system (through improved relevance, quality and efficiency).
- Cater for the learning needs of young persons who, for one reason or another, have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate provision and promotion of basic education.
- Ensure the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning⁶

2.1 MASS MEDIA AND THE UBE SCHEME

"Even God is guided on world affairs by newspapers"⁷, so quipped the famous German

communicator, Bertolt Brecht, while emphasising the role of the press in the modern world. Another great communication scholar, Georg Lichten-berg said "lead changed the world more than gold, especially, the lead in printing types rather than in bullets".⁸

A renowned political thinker and statesman, Thomas Jefferson, speaking in the same fashion declares that:

Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter⁹

Jefferson was therefore of the opinion that society cannot do without the Mass Media. The pertinent question to then ask is: How has the various Media establishments in the country carry out their statutory-cum-traditional functions, especially, that of education, information and enlightening the citizenry with regard to the implementation of the UBE scheme?

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Prescribing the statutory obligation of the Mass Media, Article 22 of the 1999 constitution states that:

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the Mass Media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.¹⁰

It is however questionable or debatable if the Mass Media have worked in this direction. Whereas, in a democracy, according to Akpan 1985:253 "the air waves belong to the people"¹¹ In a democratic society such as ours, the press as whole is expected to be a market place of thoughts. As a matter of fact, the media exist to serve the information needs of the citizenry. Hence, Mass Media practitioners as a whole work on the principle

that the public is entitled to all the facts in a political situation and that on the basis of these facts, it can make its own decision.

There are six registered political parties in the country today but only three, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and Alliance for Democracy (AD) are controlling the 36 states of the federation. The other three were registered about six months ago.

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A major clog in the wheel of Nigerian progress since independence has often been that of opposition parties controlling states working against laudable programmes of the Federal Government under the guise of politicking. For instance, during Nigeria's Second Republic, (1979-1983), the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) controlled states worked against the laudable housing programme of the then National Party Nigeria (NPN) controlled Federal Government.

The UPN states apart from deliberately delaying the release of land for the building of the housing estates also frustrated the implementation of the project. Whereas, if they had co-operated with the Federal Government in the implementation of the scheme, the project would have helped in ameliorating the problem of acute shortage of houses, especially, in the cities in the country today.

As it was then, so it is at the moment in some of the AD controlled states as the AD controlled states are not only hostile to the scheme but also working against its success. In Lagos State for instance, the State Commissioner for Education, Prof. Idowu Sobowale, was quoted by *The Post Express* newspaper as saying "the UBE scheme is not relevant in Lagos state"¹² adding that "while we have been implementing our own UBE from May 29, 1999, the Federal Government's version although launched in the same 1999 has not taken

off"¹³ As far as I'm concerned, this is an unfair report. It is simply one-sided. Mere adding a sentence that "the Honorable Commissioner failed to add that his government contributed to the late take off of the scheme in the state by not releasing land for the building of the six block of classrooms for the take off of the scheme in Lagos State would have given readers a true picture of the matter.

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The crux of the matter is that as far back as 2001, the Lagos State Government has unmistakably demonstrated its opposition to the scheme under flimsy excuses.

2.2 UBE IN THE WEB OF "DIRTY" POLITICKING

As hinted above, a number of states, especially, states under the control of opposition parties are either playing dirty politics or hide and seek game with the UBE scheme. The Lagos State Government for instance, while applauding the UBE projects as "Complimentary to its own programme of free, qualitative education" said in a 3-page letter dated 24th March 2001, signed by the Chairman of State Primary Education Board (SPEB), Alhaji Mukadas Fujah, to the Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, that in spite of the fact that the project is laudable, two problems deserve what he called "urgent attention."

"There is problem of land scarcity in Lagos State. Secondly, your consultants estimates of N5,019,205.34k as a unit cost of the recommended three classrooms, a store, office and VIP toilet is twice the going price in the construction market in Lagos State.

"The State government is understandably unwilling to compound the injudicious use of land with an even more grossly inefficient use of funds."

Fujah further claimed that the project could lead to what he called "an industrial disharmony in the local construction industry as a result of this highly extravagant unit

cost".

Investigation however revealed that the initial demand of states was that the federal government should release the money meant for the construction of the classrooms to them but when the federal government rejected the demand on the account that the state could divert the money elsewhere, the states resorted to playing all sorts of hide and seek game.

The national co-ordinator of the UBE, Prof. Pai Obanya said it all while deflating the various issues raised by the Lagos state government for its lukewarm attitude to the project.

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In a letter dated 15th April 2001 addressed to Alh. Fujah and the governor of Lagos State, Sen. Bola Tinubu, Prof Obanya said "it is not a hidden fact that SPEBS have disdain for 'centrally directed' construction of schools and that it would prefer decentralization by which the resources would be made to them to execute the projects. This is a policy matter and a political one".

On the cost of construction of the classrooms per block, Prof. Obanya said "bills of quantity for school projects submitted to us by Lagos SPEB... showed that some of the rates in use by our consultants in the year 2001 are even less than some of the rates used by Lagos SPEB. If the SPEB wishes to stand by its claims, it will mean that they have been over-invoicing in their bills of quantities... to maximize resources from the National funds".

On the allegation that the cost of the building would cause industrial disharmony, Prof. Obanya dismissed the claim saying "the fear is unfounded, alarmist and purely political in nature with the singular aim of leaving no options to the outright release of the entire

funds to the SPEB".

The UBE co-ordinator therefore warned that "the Lagos SPEB should be told in non-equivocal terms to desist from holding federal government to ransom by delaying further the construction of the classrooms".

While the Lagos state government was opposed to the project for selfish reasons, opinion leaders in the north are of the view that government made mistake by focusing first on the children instead of the parents.

According to Alh. Mohammed Bello, Chief Executive/Director-General, Borno State Mass Literacy Agency:-

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Government should have concentrated on educating the parents first to create the basis for the successful take off of the programme. Unfortunately, the concentration of the government was on children first which made the parents to withdraw their subjects after a year or so, turning the programme to failure in the past three years. There is no way you can force the parents to take their children to schools if they are not interested. So, the issue of compulsory UBE should not be there at all without adult education.¹⁴

The Borno State Agency For Mass Literacy boss was so categorical that "UBE will end up a failure like the former UPE if the large majority of the illiterate parents are not properly enlightened or educated through the non formal education schemes ¹⁵.

2.3 UBE AND THE MASS MEDIA, STRIKING A GOLDEN ACCORD

It could be seen thus far that a lot of things are happening behind the scene. There are subtle and overt plots by states to abort the laudable objectives of the UBE scheme earlier outlined in 2.0 above.

Till recently when the Supreme Court ruled that the control of primary education be

placed on the door step of states, several states of the federation made frantic efforts to frustrate the implementation of the scheme.

The mass media so far have shown a sort of lukewarm attitude to the UBE scheme and that is why some states could be bold enough to covertly work against its success for selfish reasons. A lot of issues worth reporting are either ignored by the mass media or poorly treated.

CONCLUSION

Thus, according to Uyo 1996:59, "the press in Nigeria is not doing enough, or can do much more than it is doing now towards righting what is critically wrong with the civil society¹⁶.

*The basic goal of the media is fact-finding and fact-giving.
That is the function of news operations; determining what
is, and saying that it is, and saying so publicly¹⁷.*

It would be a fundamental contribution of the mass media to the sustenance of the current democratic experiment when societal ills as well as anti-people attitudes of those in government are exposed. The point could be made that the excesses of some of the states with regard to the implementation of the UBE scheme could have been checked if the media had risen to the occasion.

For instance, is it not funny and unbelievable that while the Lagos State Government claimed shortage of land for the UBE scheme, at the same time, the government never complain about land to construct its LSDPC houses across the state?

The media should condemn such attitude through news, news analysis, features, editorial, cartoons, documentary etc. The argument of land scarcity is not only offensive but absurd because the constitution even allows acquisition of private property in the interest of the

public. This is where the golden accord between the mass media and the UBE scheme is necessary. The media should see the UBE as their project because as trustee of the public, whatever involves the entire children of Nigeria involves ^{the} ~~an~~ entire Nigerians.

Recently, Education Minister, Prof. Babalola Borishade, disclosed that "the federal government has expended over N3 billion on the UBE¹⁸. The minister who spoke while addressing airport correspondents in Lagos said the amount was spent on the construction of four blocks of six classrooms in each of the 774 local councils in the country.

This report, when viewed from the angle of two of the 5Ws & H of news reporting: magnitude and personality who gave the information should have made the story a front-page material but most newspapers somewhere inside the newspapers buried it.

In a related development, the Star FM radio station in Lagos quoted the Hon. Minister as saying 18 million children registered for the UBE scheme in the current school year. This figure was two million more than the original projection. The story was not listed as one of the major stories in the bulletin when it was aired. The newspapers also treated it poorly inside their pages. Whereas, education statistics for 1996 revealed that "21 million Nigerian children are of school-going age"¹⁹. Therefore, juxtaposing the 18 million children who registered with 21 million school going-age of our children makes the story a big one worth front-page treatment or inside page lead, unfortunately, it was equally shabbily treated.

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The truth of the matter is that if the media does not attach importance to certain stories, the public cannot be expected to attach seriousness to such story. That is why the media is reputed to be an Agenda setting institution.

According to Folarin 1998: 68,

Agenda setting implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society. Agenda - setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about²⁰.

CONCLUSION

This paper has made the point that the country's mass media are not doing enough to support the implementation of the UBE scheme. The paper also calls for a change in attitude so as to enable our leaders of tomorrow secure their tomorrow firmly today through adequate education. It also charged the media to expose and discourage dirty politicking by state governments who often times selfishly opposed federal government's policies for political reasons. This, invariably, is the golden accord advocated by the paper with regard to the implementation of the UBE scheme.

Conclusively, it is hereby suggested that to enlist the support of the mass media in the implementation of the UBE scheme, there should be regular parley between media executives, editors and education correspondents where government would enlighten them about the objectives of the programme and also enlist their support.

Secondly, the bureaucratic concept of anonymity, which forbade civil servants from speaking to newsmen, must be jettisoned if the media is to lend support. There should be accessibility of the media to information about activities of the scheme. Alternatively, a Public Relations Officer (PRO) who would liaise with the media establishments could be employed.

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