



The Political Economy of the Publishing Industry in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the political economy of book publishing in Nigeria. It looks at practices in the book publishing industry and at the various forces that influence the decisions made by the established Nigerian Book Publishers to accept or reject a manuscript for publication. It argues that the drivers for most of these decisions are largely socio-economic and political and that unless checked, these drivers could distort the basic values of books which are to promote the sharing of knowledge and cultural products for the development of a nation. The article identifies a number of barriers that exclude manuscripts by authors with low status and power from the shelf of the accepted manuscript list of the major book publishing houses. It examines possible coping strategies of excluded writers, including self-publishing, the challenges that these pose and ends by arguing that putting in place a mechanism that would ensure that valuable manuscripts by authors with low power and status should be seen as social responsibility by the established publishers and governments.

Keywords

Book Publishing, Unpublished Authors, Political Economy, Power, Influence

Subject Areas: Information Science, Journalism and Communication

1. Introduction

The book publishing industry in any country exists to meet the reading and cultural needs of that society. This is because of the critical roles that books play in the cognitive and social transformation of societies. Indeed, the role of books and literacy in nation building is now part of the development folklore. Books perform the following functions in society—they preserve and transmit cultural heritage, they are vehicles for the creation and sharing of ideas, they stimulate cognitive growth and development, and lastly, books are veritable tools for societal

development as well as the most cost effective and democratic source of information, education and entertainment (Bittner, 1989: p. 76; Folarin, 1988: p. 27) [1] [2]. Indeed, book availability and national literacy levels have been shown to correlate positively with socio-economic development (UNESCO, 2015) [3]. Given the function and nature thus of books, choices of manuscripts to accept for publication in such an intellectual business area that is of such vital importance for national and personal development ought to be guided and driven largely by objective considerations such as the pursuit of excellence, promotion of scholarship as well as by the potentials of manuscripts to contribute to the commonwealth of knowledge and to the progress of civilization.

Publishing is both a profession and a business. It involves the selection, preparation, production, marketing and distribution of print communication materials. The process of publishing involves the acceptance or acquisition of a manuscript, its editing, the designing of the book's final appearance, the actual manufacture into book form and the distribution of the book to booksellers and other outlets (Askerud, 1997; Okwilagwe, 2001) [4] [5]. Sadly, however, choices in this industry are not as simple, innocent and objective as they ought to be. In fact, on closer examination, the industry shows itself to be one populated by stakeholders with differential powers and interests and one where power asymmetries do play crucial roles in determining the future of any submitted manuscript. In this industry, what should be objective processes find themselves framed and limited by deep subjective considerations that take cognizance not just of the intrinsic value of the manuscript but also of other larger considerations such as markets, sales potentials, profits and personal relationships. This reality of the book publishing industry in Nigeria is responsible for the complaints one hears so frequently about book publishing houses and the decisions they take. Areo, an author and renowned publishing consultant (Areo, 2009) [6], is a typical expression of dissatisfaction with industry practice:

“when an unknown writer presents his manuscript (even a masterpiece) to the publisher ‘unsolicited’ by them, he has a very slim chance of acceptance success; he has less than 2% chance of acceptance”. (Areo, 2009: p. 178) [6]

Laments such as the above by scholars sadly emanate from a failure to reflect all the relevant parameters in evaluating the decisions that publishing houses make. A close examination of these comments would reveal that they betray an attempt to use a social responsibility theory of media in evaluating the activities of the book publishing industry in Nigeria. Given the preponderant and continuing influence of Social responsibility media theory (SRMT, for short) on the thinking and evaluative judgments of mass media practitioners in the world in general and in Nigeria in particular, a short review of the essentials of this theory is important since it constitutes such an important conceptual framework for persons in the media field.

2. Social Responsibility Media Theory

Social responsibility media theory (SRMT) has had a long history in media and communication studies all over the world. Formulated by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in their seminal book in 1956 (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956) [7], Social Responsibility Media Theory (SRMT) holds mass media in all its ramifications to the highest levels of ethical and professional responsibility in the selection and presentation of its content. It preaches objectivity and the supremacy of public interests in the activities of media and communication houses. It was developed to guide and explain activities in the print and broadcast media, especially the press. SRMT assumes rationality, the pursuit of the public good and the quest for the best guided by an overall concern with national interests. SRMT argues that mass media should be accountable to society and recognize the pluralist nature of modern society. Furthermore, SRMT demands that mass media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society, and that these obligations are best met by demanding very rigorous self regulating professional standards that place truth, objectivity, accuracy and balance above all other considerations (McQuail, 2005) [8].

When applied to evaluating choices and decisions in the book publishing industry in Nigeria, a SRMT theory, which is essentially normative in intention and orientation, is bound to pick holes in these practices and to thus condemn them of falling short of “an SRMT” golden norm. But on close examination, such an approach of using SRMT to judge the goings-on in the book publishing industry is both unproductive and inadequate since it amounts to extending a framework beyond its legitimate remit. As we tried to show in the preceding paragraph, SRMT tries to propound a normative theory and guide for decent practice by persons in the mass media. It is about the desirable. But it is important to point out that the desirable is not always the same as what obtains in

real life and that a theory of the desirable has limited explanatory power in unpacking the realities of the book publishing industry where a number of dynamics, some nice, some good, some ugly, come into play. As was stated earlier, laments that seek to indict the book publishing industry for departing from SRMT type of rationality in its choices are unrealistic. We shall be arguing in this paper that a realistic theory of the book industry should reflect the diverse considerations—(power, economy, profit and status)—that shape decisions and frame the technical processes that then kick in after the major decision to accept or reject a document has been taken. Such decisions are influenced by considerations that touch on political economy. The next section examines political economy theory which is the conceptual framework that informs our analysis of the book industry in Nigeria in this paper.

3. Political Economy as a Conceptual Framework

Simply defined then, political economy is the interplay between economics, law and politics, and how institutions develop in different social and economic systems, such as capitalism, socialism and communism” (Political Economy Definition|Investopedia) [9]. It is “the study and use of how economic theory and methods influences political ideology” (Leftwich, 2006: p. 10) [10] and informs practical decisions. Political economy combines the lens of economics which deals with scarcity and the attendant choices humans must make with that of politics which concerns itself with how power is actuated in formal and informal institutions, especially in situations of heterogeneous and competing interests. It concerns itself with explicating power relations and how these power relations influence and frame the bargaining powers and actions of different stakeholders caught in real life situations where competition is often the norm, interests are not always homogenous and where choices therefore have to be made (Leftwich, 2006; Kingdon *et al.*, 2014, Drazen, 2000; Mcloughlin, 2014) [10]-[13]. Commenting on political economy, Brieger (2006) [14] noted that “*Political economy assumes that resources are allocated not on the basis of relative efficiency or merit—but according to power*”. *He goes on to state that “the behavior and dynamics of visible and invisible actors” within a “sector therefore can only be understood in terms of their power and class position in the larger social system”*. (pp. 3-5)

The questions of political economy are usually the following—who are the relevant actors, what are their interests, how are their incentives and strategies shaped by the contexts in which they operate and how do they exercise power in pursuing their ends? All such questions are relevant to decisions in the publishing industry globally and even more acutely in developing economies like Nigeria where the exercise and pursuit of power is not so subtle. Even in the developed economies, Hind’s article on the political economy of publishing (Hind, 2011) [15] has observed the distorting effects of money and power in the publishing industry. Hind’s observations (Hind, 2011) [15] on the role that corporate power, financial muscle, personal influence and ideology play on editorial board decisions on what and who to publish are instructive and reveal that such choices are not driven by objective considerations alone but by a combination of pragmatism, power and politics. A political economy theory (PET, for short) thus posits that it is the interplay of power, interest and mediated influence that determines what happens in any sector. In the book industry, PET would enable us to understand that publishing houses will not publish every manuscript submitted to them but will rather have to make choices on which manuscripts to publish taking into consideration their overall strategic interests, the power and influence of the various stakeholders they engage with and the need for optimal returns on every choice made.

The book publishing industry is no exception. In such a system, merit and efficiency take a back seat leaving the centre stage for the greater forces of power, status and economy to play and shape things. Applied to the book industry, PET would posit that manuscripts written by the powerful stand better chances of being published than those written by persons with less power. It would argue that though the book publishing industry has its gate keepers, such gate keepers are likely to show greater laxity and flexibility when the rich and powerful come knocking at the gates. It would enable one to understand why critical decision makers in the book publishing industry are more likely to lean more to favor persons in the upper end of the power and status quadrant. PET is a more robust theory with greater explanatory power than social responsibility influenced theories for happenings in the book industry as it recognizes the role that economic considerations play in the overall decision making process in any industry. Whilst a social responsibility theory influenced critique of book publishing would lament the non-acceptance of manuscripts by authors with low power and status and lament these because of its essential idealism, A PET theory informed review of decisions by publishing houses can explain and can indeed predict such a happening given its greater realism and its underlying recognition of market forces interplay of power.

The rest of the paper looks at the processes, practices and realities in the publishing industry in Nigeria after a very cursory sketch of its historical origins in Nigeria. This section and comments in it benefitted a lot from informal interviews with scholars who have had experiences in the book publishing industry and with current practitioners in the industry as key informants. The prompts for these informal key informant interviews were the following:

- 1) who and what considerations determine what manuscripts gets accepted and published?; and
- 2) where does actual power to accept a manuscript lie in a typical publishing house in Nigeria?

A PET informed perspective is then used to interpret information gathered during these informal interviews and guides our observations in this section. We then end with some recommendations on how some of the disequilibrium created by forces of political economy and market forces can be corrected so that authors with low power but with socially beneficial manuscripts can be published.

4. Modern Book Publishing in Nigeria, Origins, Structure and Current Practices

Book publishing is still a fairly recent phenomenon in Nigeria. Oxford University Press (now University Press Plc) was the first publishing house to establish a West African branch in Ibadan in 1948. Other publishing companies—all of them transnational followed suit. For example, Longman Green and company came to Nigeria in 1961; Heinemann in 1965; Macmillan in 1965; Evans in 1966. Over time, publishing has developed into a vast and complex industry responsible for the dissemination of all manner of cultural materials that vary from the most trivial to the loftiest.

The Nigerian book industry is a challenging one. To understand it, one must first understand that it is made up of a number of firms in stiff competition for limited markets. Entry into the industry is however limited by high set up costs and the existence of a vibrant book piracy underworld poses further threats to the firms already struggling in the industry. To further understand the tensions, one must also understand the internal structure and dynamics of a typical publishing house and the various forces that come into play in its decision making processes on whether to publish or not to publish. Basically there are two major divisions—educational and general publishers. The former concerns itself with textbooks for school system whilst the latter focuses on books of general interest reading and on tertiary levels materials. The divisions focusing on books for the school system pick authors, publish them and pay royalties. A lot of the revenue yield potential here depends on getting the book in question into the school syllabi. Once this is achieved, sales assured. Most publishers in Nigeria fall into this division. School Textbook publishing represents a vital business strategic business unit for most of these publishing houses. Here the power of the political economy model in explicating the idiosyncracies of the book publishing industry is very obvious. What one notices here are shrewd business and hard-nosed thinking from sustained courting of members of textbook selection committees in ministries of education to the selection of writers and authors from the academic community of persons with power, prestige and pedigree. Teaching subject associations are also courted often through poorly concealed financial inducement methods such as under-writing their annual conferences or the publication of their association's journals. The courting of ministry officials itself is also not innocent and can indeed be amoral with sizeable financial inducements passing under the table to members of such committees. These financial outflows can be sizeable and are made with the knowledge that they can be recouped through huge sales and the attendant profits. Even the marketing of such books reflect this pure profit motive—the cover pages and the blurbs strikingly point out that the books in question cover the requirement for such and such level of study and that the books in question have met all the requirements of the local and regional examinations syllabi and have received the endorsement of this and that ministry of education and the following subject associations. A social responsibility media theory would be incapable to explain such aberrations as it assumes the triumph of rationality and objectivity whereas the reality is far from it.

The remaining arm of the publishing house focuses on general books and it must be recognized that this arm is the under-privileged one in any publishing house. By general books here, one means things like novels, biographies, autobiographies and general interest books. We may also include tertiary books under this heading. Here the dynamics vary depending on the commercial worth of the manuscript, the prestige of the author, etc. Here too, the likelihood of a manuscript been accepted is a function of three inter-related factors—a judgment of the market size of the targeted readership, the trendiness of the topic it examines and the assessed market appeal value of the author. The higher this appeal value, the greater the likelihood that the manuscript will be positively

assessed and passed. What matters here is not the intrinsic value of the manuscript in terms of its potential to contribute to the universal stock of knowledge or practice as much as its potential to rake in monies and profit. The profit motive is thus ultimately supreme. The point bears making that no matter how good or even benevolent his mission is; if the Chief Executive Office of a book publishing company does not make profit, he/she will only last a while before folding up. The bottom line of any business is profit.

The profit objective and imperative of commercial book publishing are well expressed in this excerpt from Areo (2009) [6]:

The need for each book, even if it is one of the several hundred being produced by a company to sell in sufficient quantities to bring in enough cash, after payment of the royalty percentage to the author, to cover its production cost, contribute its fair share to the over heads, produce the required level of profit to contribute to the working capital for investment in new books. Areo (2009: p. 143) [6]

There is nothing about social responsibility here. What is on display in decisions to publish or not to publish is actually the power of economic considerations to determine the fate of cultural products and to shape and filter what is produced and consumed in these domains of culture and learning. Reference has been made to a concept of “author market appeal” and an unpacking of this concept is appropriate here especially with regard to identifying what constitutes it for the publishing industry. Persons who have held high leadership positions (ex-presidents, ex-governors, ex-senators, retired army officers), ex-coup plotters, persons with scandalous conduct and religious leaders have high market appeal value as the publishing house is sure their manuscripts once these are published will sell.

The question that could arise at this point is why such practices persist and how such an intellectual industry could run at the whims of the profit motive. Deriving from the above is the question whether there are no laid down policies in the industry to guide practice. True, each publishing house has its editorial policy and house style drawn up by its management and approved by its board. But the sad reality is that the observed practice is often at variance with such laid down policies, such variances attesting to the power of the forces of political economy to shape and determine industry realities. In such an industry, the marketing departments thus appear to wield a determining power beyond their size and their inputs are the critical ones in deciding whether a manuscript goes forward beyond the submission stage. It is market worth that rules. And this explains why a manuscript say on neurophysiology or computational linguistics or digital mapping with their limited readership stands little chance of being accepted, except it is author-financed in which case the publishing house is actually serving simply as a printing press.

However, when the manuscript is submitted by persons who fall into the high market appeal category, other considerations now come into play. Such persons are usually persons with high influence and high net worth value in society. Friendship with such people confers immense benefits on a publishing house as such a friendship could be used to leverage vital contacts, connections and contracts with potential to bring business to the publishing house. It is usually such considerations that propel CEOs to disregard the advice of their technical teams and go ahead and approve the publication of a book even when expert and objective reviews of its truth, fact and cultural values are far from positive. If the writer is well known, influential, well published or highly popular, (attributes that would assure huge sales) such a person is rapidly “commissioned” by the business-seeking publisher.

It is into this imperfect terrain that the little known publisher steps in wanting to use the publishing house to advance his desire for professional and social mobility. (The assumption that his/her motivations are largely altruistic and derive from a desire to advance society and knowledge is not necessarily true. The desire for upward professional mobility is itself an indication of a self serving purpose as the desired mobility would bring with it fame, publicity, influence, power and money among other things). But this little published author has the odds stacked against him or her, and success would depend on how he could leverage the critical determiners of manuscript acceptability and tilt these to his/her favor. But his/her fight is against established interests and powerful groups and in an arena where money and influence play determining roles. In this arena, a key informant told the authors of this paper that a chairman of a particular publishing company in Ibadan is quoted to have said to a very brilliant young and upcoming author with intimidating credentials:

you may be the most brilliant person in the whole world. A combination of circumstances may disqualify you from being published. Some publishers may bluntly tell you that ... my editor approves your manuscript, but my marketing department says there is no demand for it.

Oluwadipe (2000) [16] agrees that the primary interest of the publisher is how much profit can be made from the book project. The decision to publish is thus not taken until the necessary marketing research has confirmed that the title and book being proposed, meet a real and widespread need. Here again as would be predicted by a political economy model, a professional decision is now hijacked by commercial considerations.

-Nigerian Publishing and the Unpublished Writer, the way forward

We have seen that the forces of political economy can exclude manuscripts from being published even when such manuscripts have huge potential to contribute to national development. We have also noted how a combination of factors bordering on power, status, influence, incentives and interests of different stakeholders can conspire to deny access to the publication of a manuscript submitted by persons with limited power and influence. Such denials of access are certainly not in the interest of society as valuable materials with potential to contribute to overall national development could be lost in the process. Given the critical role of books in national development, and given the intimate link between book publication and book reading, it follows that every effort should be made nationally to ensure the existence of a vibrant book publishing industry that provides outlet for budding publishers to produce their books and contribute to the growing repository of published books. Seen in this light, book publishing becomes a moral, patriotic and professional responsibility and one to be carried out with government support whenever market forces lead to market failures and create certain aberrations.

Some deliberate intervention is therefore needed to correct for such situations where the free operation of market forces and the interplay of elements of the political economy conspire to exclude persons with socially useful ideas from contributing through books to the progress of their societies. Here, we see an important role for policy guidelines and the strengthening of those institutions whose core mandates include ensuring the emergence of a vibrant, socially responsive and inclusive book industry. One of such national structures is the Book Development Centre (BDC) of the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). The BDC must therefore be enabled through adequate financing to set aside funds to be used to publish deserving manuscripts that may be excluded from publication by market forces. The BDC must act to show that it is aware that encouraging young writers is social a responsibility and that the setting aside of special funds to encourage writers would ultimately stimulate authorship.

There should also be legal requirements which compel the rich publishing houses to encourage the unpublished writers and scholarship by ploughing some of their huge profits into book development initiatives. Here, such houses may need to partner with UNESCO, NERDC, the Nigerian Publishers Association (NPA), the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in a bid to see that the unpublished author's manuscript gets a chance at fair and objective review and consideration. Encouraging banks to give loans on very soft interest and long term repayment conditions to persons with manuscripts may also make it easier for persons with manuscripts to self publish, even though self publication has its risks, the moat prominent of which is the absence any external rigorous quality control. Finally, authors with manuscripts should also be encouraged to explore the possibility of online publishing even though this reduces their readership to only persons with internet access.

5. Conclusion

Books are powerful tools in the struggle to tame the growth of illiteracy, ignorance and poverty. Failure to educate people, and the provision of books is key to all purposeful education, retards the intellectual and social development of any nation. As has been pointed out, the level of development in a nation can be linked to its level of literacy which book fosters. This is because books are crucial in the entire information, education and communication processes, beginning with the pre-primary school to the creative or scientific masterpiece of different fields. A nation is as progressive as its book industry. A book industry is vibrant to the extent it allows unfettered access to all those who are willing and able to produce useful manuscripts. Realities that exclude persons who are willing and able from access to this industry are a disservice to any nation. Actions taken to level the playing field and which allow the "under-privileged" manuscript author access to the world of published persons will thus not only be useful at the individual psychological level but would also have socially salutary effects on national development. The suggested actions involving government intervention are driven by this realization.

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