

Some Ethical Challenges in Media Advertising in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Zimbabwean Case Study

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Abstract

The media have, since the turn of the 20th century, occupied a unique and strategic position in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Unlike most other businesses, the media have acquired most profits not directly from the public readership but indirectly through advertising. Due to the influx of multi-national corporations (MNCs) in Sub-Saharan Africa, the media have become very useful in advertising and marketing products from these large corporates. Through media advertising, these large corporates have managed to beat competition and remain in business. This article however, brings to the fore some of the ethical challenges that confront media and corporate advertising in sub-Saharan Africa. In this article, I argue that the media need to strike a balance between corporate advertising and information dissemination if it is to serve its main function of educating, informing and entertaining its consumers, who are the public.

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Introduction

Media ethics have always clashed with business values (particularly the profit motive) to the extent that advertisements have been given prominence over and above media content. This development has been predominant in sub-Saharan Africa due to the influx of outside companies advertising their products. This does not mean that advertising is predominant in sub-Saharan Africa alone as it is a global phenomenon but it is the manner in which the media have somehow relegated the media's ethical role to inform, educate and entertain which is of concern to me in this article. Most of these companies are multi nationals with their headquarters in England, Germany, France, Japan and the United States of America. The space allotted for news items has always been determined by the amount of space required for advertising thereby giving news and entertainment second priority. This has had negative ethical implications and the thesis advanced in this presentation is that there is need to balance the script if media consumers, that is, readers and viewers are not going to be disadvantaged.

In this paper I argue that media organizations need to find other means of generating income rather than solely relying on advertising. The paper draws closer home and tries to look at the media in Zimbabwe and the ethical issues therein in the light of the pre eminence of advertising in both the print and the electronic media. The paper begins by defining key terms such as *ethics*, *media*, *media ethics*, *advertising* and *multi-national corporations* (MNCs). In the last section of this article, I consider the critical role that media ethics plays in the inculcation of societal norms and values and how advertising has, to some extent, become an obstacle to that role.

Defining *media ethics* and *advertising*

It will probably be over-generalizing to define *media ethics* before defining *ethics* and *morality* especially in a paper of this nature where clarity in argumentation is key. To this end, the word *ethics* is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning *custom, usage* or *character* (Day, 2003: 2). For the Greeks, *ethics* referred to the study of what is good both for the individual and for society (Patterson, 1998:3). The Greeks were concerned with the individual virtues of courage, justice, temperance and wisdom as well as societal virtues such as freedom (1998:3). Two thousand years later, ethics have come to mean learning to make rational choices between what is good and bad, what is morally justifiable action and what is not... Rationality is the key word here, for the Greeks believed and modern philosophers affirm that people should be able to justify their ethical decisions to others. When one justifies his or her ethical decision, he or she does so by way of reason. Ethics

take us out of the world of “this is the way I do it” or “this is the way it’s always been done” into the realm of “this is what I should do” or “this is the action that can be rationally justified.” Ethics in this sense have the same meaning as “ought talk” (1998: 2).

The word *moral*, on the other hand, is derived from the Latin *mos, moris* meaning (among other things) “way of life” or “conduct” (Day, 2003: 2). Thus, *morality* refers to those social rules and principles that guide and regulate human conduct. It will, however, be wrong to define ethics and morality from a Western perspective without also considering African notions or definitions of the same concept(s). From an African view point, as K Ndeti puts it, the terms *morality* and *ethics* denote the rules, traditions, taboos and principles used in a given society to guide and regulate behaviour (Kaba and Rayapen, 1990: 33).

The question which follows logically from the above definition is: Who originates these rules, traditions and taboos? It would seem several sources are responsible. First, Africa’s concept of being is deeply rooted in ontology, that is, within the African being, there is an intrinsic cognition of right and wrong (1990: 33). Second, the rules, traditions and taboos of a society are ascribed, that is, they are picked up at birth and children grow up with them and they manifest themselves through formal instruction or teaching (Mangena, 2007: 129). In this article I consider both Western and African ethical perspectives in order to accommodate every reader who comes across this

work and also in the spirit of the envisaged and growing call for a global ethic that will resonate with the demands of the global village. But four crucial questions remain even after succinctly defining *morality* and *ethics*: How can *media ethics* be defined? Should we seek for a common ground? Should we go by the Western view point? What about the African view point?

Whatever perspective one will take will still lead to the same conclusion that in every work our journalists and media organizations do, they should be guided by ethical principles of the media, be they Western or African. *Media* here refers to those devices through which both audio and visual messages are transmitted to the mass audience. This can be done through radio, television, newspapers, magazines, business journals, movies and computer networks known today as the internet (Baran, 2002:6). For Baran, the words *media* and *mass media* can be used interchangeably to refer to the communication industries themselves (2006: 6). Basically, there are two types of media namely, the print and the electronic media. The print media include; newspapers, magazines, business journals, books and pamphlets *inter alia*. The electronic media include; the television, radio, video, the internet and the cable network among others.

With this clear cut distinction between *ethics*, *morality* and *media*, it is crucial, therefore, to define *media ethics* as that branch of ethics which deals with the particular ethical principles and/or standards of the media. It is critical to note

that everything that a journalist does has ethical dimensions, to a lesser or greater degree because, '...everything a journalist writes or omits has an influence to people, good or bad' (Retief, 2002: 4). *Media ethics* also looks at ethical dilemmas and other such questions of mass media. Some of the dilemmas in the media are; is it ethical to give priority to advertising at the expense of news and entertainment? Is it ethical to fabricate stories in order to lure the readership? Is it ethical for a journalist to dig deeper into the private life of a celebrity including his dark side of life? *Media ethics* also consider questions of media content, media censorship and media bias as found in both the print and electronic media. *Media ethics* give prominence to the cardinal virtues of truthfulness, honesty, accuracy, fairness, objectivity and consistence at the expense of vices such as deception and lying. But what is the place of *advertising* in *media ethics*? In order to properly capture or understand the relationship between *media ethics* and *advertising*, it will be crucial to define *advertising* itself.

Advertising

Etymologically, the word *advertising* is derived from the French word *avertir*, which means bringing something deliberately to someone's notice (Domatob et al, 1987: 282). Its major purpose is to establish an awareness of, create favourable attitude to and stimulate demand for a product, idea or service among potential consumers (1987: 282). When applied to the mass media, *advertising* relates to any paid message that appears in the mass media for the purpose of

selling, informing or persuading people about particular products, services or beliefs (1987: 282). But what is advertising in the eyes of newspaper and television managers and executives? Of what value is it to their existence? As Conrad Fink remarks, 'advertising's defenders –newspaper and television executives among them – naturally regard advertising as a form of communication that permits consumers to make intelligent choices by providing them with valuable information on products and services' (Fink, 1988: 123). In sub-Saharan Africa, most advertising is done by Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) who have sound financial bases as compared to local conglomerates. By way of definition, Multi-National Corporations are multi product firms most of whose shares are owned by a few people in one country and whose manufacturing and sales are fragmented into many partial subsidiary operations across a linked system straddling many countries (Domatob et al, 1987: 282).

Nearly all their revenue comes from their overseas branches. Half of these MNCs have their headquarters in the USA, while the rest are based in West Germany, Japan, the UK, Italy, France and Holland. Their main aims are to maximize profits and to accumulate more in the hands of these conglomerates. Sub-Saharan Africa's participation in the international production process is minimal. Most importantly, all crucial decisions on policing, innovation, profit level, new investments and location are not taken locally in Africa but at the distant head offices in New York, Tokyo, Bonn, Paris, London and Amsterdam (1987: 282). In the next section, I

consider the impact of sensationalism and advertising in sub-Saharan Africa with a view to see how these two concepts sometimes clash with readers' values and expectations.

Sensationalism and advertising in sub-Saharan Africa

When applied to the media, the marketing concept holds that all departments, including news must contribute to the financial well being of the organization. Thus, news executives are expected to package their news and information to attract a target audience and to exploit the economic potential of the market place (Day, 2003: 248).

In sub-Saharan Africa, media organizations have also packaged their news items and information to attract public readership and to exploit the economic potential of the market. To add spice to their news, some media organizations have resorted to sensationalism to attract the public readership.

Sensationalism involves over-exaggerating stories or coming up with juicy headlines to court the readership. In Zimbabwe, this practice has been rampant in the public and private media where stories have been cooked up to hook the readers into buying the newspapers in this competitive environment. In the run up to the 2002 presidential elections, *The Daily News* (now defunct) alleged that a Guruve woman had been beheaded by some youth linked to the ruling ZANU PF but it was later discovered empirically that no such thing had happened and the editor of the newspaper was asked to retract the story. This is one case among many where

sensationalism has been used as a marketing tool to woo the readers and viewers in the case of the electronic media. *Sensationalism* has set its deep roots, particularly, in third world countries because of the growing need by media organizations to beat competition when it comes to the dissemination of media messages to the consumers.

But as fate would have it, *sensationalism* now seems to be a decrepit concept as it has since been overtaken by such concepts as censorship, agenda setting and gate keeping especially in the western media. *Sensationalism* is a gross violation of the journalistic imperative, which stipulates that the media's ethical role is to educate, inform and entertain the public and to tell the truth always. The ethics of journalism suffer when media organizations deliberately try to treat the media consumers as uncritical recipients of media messages without considering their axiological nature as moral agents. Not only has the media resorted to sensationalism as a marketing strategy in sub-Saharan Africa. *Advertising* has also taken precedence over media content to the extent that even space in the newspapers is determined by the space allotted for *advertising*.

There has also been an increase in soft news decked in feature stories as well as supplements known as advertorials actually paid for by advertisers but cloaked in the respectability of media content (Day, 2003:251). The electronic variation of the advertorial is the infomercial. Well, this is a normal practice the world over but in Africa, it is more pronounced and it

impacts negatively on the ethics of journalism, which calls for objectivity, balance and fairness when writing news. The position of this paper is that, it is very difficult to adhere to these virtues of journalism if there is not enough space allotted for news because the whole space is eaten up by the advert.

The economic pressures exerted by the influence of advertising are quite apparent to say the least. Sometimes, these adverts carry messages considered immoral from an African point of view. In Zimbabwe there are those adverts on condoms which describe men who use condoms as smart guys, but which are seen by the custodians of African value systems, that is, chiefs and other traditional leaders as promoting sexual immorality instead of abstinence in this day and age of HIV and AIDS. But because these media organizations survive on advertising, they have no choice except to bend the ethical stipulations and give prominence to business values. By and large, the quality of commercial material determines the amount of space or time remaining for non-advertising content; that is, news and entertainment. Newspaper editors are obliged to arrange their editorial content in the space remaining after the advertising department lays out its adverts on the pages (2003: 253). As Fink succinctly captures it in apparent reference to media and advertising in America:

Media managers today must perform efficiently and profitably in their business responsibilities or soon be unemployed. The "rising tide of shareholder

expectation" and other imperatives of successful business leadership force many newspapers and television managers to put profit first; everything else is second – sometimes including ethical, socially responsible journalism. Exceptions are those lucky managers whose organizations are enlightened (and profitable) enough to follow good, sound journalism as a route to financial success. But even they must keep their business priorities straight (Fink, 1988: 139).

This argument might appear to be applicable only to American business enterprises but it also applies to Africa, in general and Zimbabwe, in particular. In television news, producers have to slot their stories around commercials so that there is a limit on the amount of time devoted to each package (Day, 2003: 253). Even entertainment is more often interrupted by commercial breaks or spot announcements. The Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) has commercial breaks mostly during prime time viewing and programmes often affected include; *Ezomgidho*, a musical programme held every Thursday from 18:30 to 19:30 pm, *This is Football*, a football talk show and phone-in programme held every Wednesday at 10 pm and many other programmes such as *Face the Nation* and *Mai Chisamba Show*.

While advertising plays a very influential role in media packaging the world over, sub-Saharan Africa seems to have the biggest chunk of advertising material because of the influx

of MNCs and because of the need to “develop” these nations reeling in abject poverty. The MNCs have the money and the host nations must provide the labour force and the medium of communicating those commercial products to the people. This gives rise to the dependatio syndrome, which in turn relegates ethical issues in the media to the dustbin of history. The next section looks at the influx of MNCs in sub-Saharan Africa, ethical implications for the mass media and the way forward.

The Influx of MNCs in the media and ethical implications for sub-Saharan Africa

As Richard J Barnett et al (1980:126) argue, MNCs dominate advertising in sub-Saharan Africa. These corporations with vast resources at their disposal flood sub-Saharan Africa radios and newspapers with their messages (1980: 126). In sub-Saharan Africa, strategic advertising space on newspapers and peak radio listening and television viewing periods are monopolized by products like Coca-Cola, Tobacco, Beer and other consumables (Yermoshkin, 1984). In Kenya and most of Francophone Africa, MNCs finance over 80% of most of the adverts on radio and television (Yermokshin, 1984).

The same also applies to Zimbabwe and other Anglophone states. Notwithstanding the economic slide that Zimbabwe has been plunged into in recent years and the relocation of MNCs to better economies such as South Africa, Zimbabwe has experienced a rise in the advertising of alcoholic beverages by the remaining MNCs such as Coca-cola Africa and Delta Beverages advertising castle larger. It's not only beer that has

topped the list of advertising in sub-Saharan Africa. Cigarettes have also had a fair share of advertising with brands such as Pacific storm topping the list of advertised cigarettes particularly in Zimbabwe.

The ethical challenges of advertising in Zimbabwe

There is no doubt that advertising creates awareness as to what goods and services are available and how consumers can access them. There is no doubt, too, that advertising brings lots and lots of benefits to host nations and these benefits include employment particularly in advertising agencies. Those who have supported the idea of MNCs advertising in less developed regions of Africa have also supported the above view. For them, advertising raises people's living standards by encouraging sales of mass produced goods thus, stimulating production and creating employment and prosperity (Domatob, 1987: 283).

Zimbabwe has also seen a lot of advertising agencies advertising consumables such as food, motor vehicles and other services. The Gary Thompson and Associates (GTA) is one such advertising agency that has taken Zimbabwe newspapers and television advertising by storm. Coming hard on the heels of a nation that has been hit by a shortage of advertising agency due to economic recession, GTA has opened a new chapter in Zimbabwe's advertising history. The advertising company is in partnership with companies such as Cairns foods, National foods, African twist and Jaggers, advertising their products through the television question and

answer programme called Money or the Box (M.O.B) held every Monday at 7pm. The advertising company has also joined hands with the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe (CBZ) to advertise and promote music talent among the youths in Zimbabwe through what has come to be called *The CBZ A Academy* a music competition held annually in Zimbabwe.

Chris Doghudje sums up some of the positive benefits of advertising by MNCs as follows:

It is now a fact universally acknowledged that the most powerful means by which the availability of goods and services can be known is advertising. This is why advertising is embraced by capitalist countries. But not every body is aware that advertising is also the most powerful means for the selling of ideas, of policies and of government. Too, often advertising is seen as no more than a selling tool to be used by businessmen. But governments, charitable organizations and political parties all need advertising for the promotion of their ideas, policies and worthwhile causes (Doghudje, 1987: 2)

In a way, it is perfectly true that consumer goods have brought some comfort and pleasure to black Africans, and in a few cases, have alleviated want and hardship. This is quite ethical. According to the McBride report, advertising promotes desirable social aims, like savings and investments. It provides the consumer with information about possible

patterns of expenditure. Small scale “classified” advertising which in the aggregate fills as much space in some newspapers is a useful form of communication about the employment market, between local small businesses and their customers and between individuals and their various needs. Just flipping through or perusing the classified section of *The Herald*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Chronicle*, *The Sunday News*, *The Daily mirror* or *The Sunday Mirror* (now defunct), one notices the advertising of luxury goods such as phones, cars, situations vacancies (jobs), houses for sale, building material and other consumables. But this is as far as business values are concerned.

Advertising raises serious ethical questions. First, it promotes consumerism - a way of life centred on consumption and assigning consumption the priority in the set of human values, which leads to the championing of a production rather than a consumption ethos (Domatob, 1987: 286). Second, much as advertising is overwhelmingly directed towards the selling of goods and services, which can be valued in monetary terms, it tends to promote attitudes and life styles, which extol acquisition and consumption at the expense of other values (1987: 286). As Fink sums it up, ‘advertising creates unnecessary materialistic consumer desires psychological in origin and it is thus manipulative and wasteful’ (Fink, 1988: 124). Third, advertising permits large, financially strong firms to dominate an industry because only they can afford the high cost of advertising with small firms thus effectively barred

from an influential role, the oligopolistic few can raise prices at will (1988: 124).

Not only that, advertising by MNCs mostly produce unnecessary overpriced and sometimes harmful goods such as alcoholic spirits in the category of breakers international, Skippers and other alcoholic beverages together with tobacco which, when advertised in both the print and the electronic media, are accompanied by a warning message, *Alcohol may be hazardous to health if consumed to excess. Not for sale to people under the age of 18 or Tobacco causes cancer.* Isn't this a moral contradiction? For instance, on their front pages, American newspapers report the latest study linking use of tobacco to cancer.

On their editorial pages, they (American newspapers) sound the alarm, calling for massive research into cancer and its causes. Throughout their pages American newspapers publish advertisements for tobacco products including cigarettes, which...are a deadly product (Fink, 1988: 132). It is, however, encouraging to note that calls for tobacco ban have, of late, been intensifying in America. But when MNCs in sub-Saharan Africa intensify their advertising, are they saying Africans are resistant to cancer? Or is this some form of a racial prank, salient kind of?

These adverts have negative implications as they may lead to both physiological and psychological reparcations. Social vices such as violence may also result from the consumption of

these products and yet a lot of time and space is devoted for their advertising at the expense of real news or entertainment value. Quality news and entertainment value are not given more prominence as more space is allotted to advertising material. I will continue to reiterate that this has serious ethical implications.

The Way forward

1. A media ethics regulatory board needs to be established to provide checks and balances on what should be advertised in terms of the quality and quantity of material to be advertised. Morally offensive material such as those involving the use of condoms must not be allowed in our newspaper pages and television screens as these promote sexual immorality and other such vices.
2. Media organizations need to find other means of generating income rather than only through advertising. They should always aim at improving the quality of the news that they disseminate to the public so as to generate national interest and hence maximize on profit through sales.
3. Virtues of truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, objectivity and honesty must be cultivated and vices such as lying and deception must be avoided, as these will create disinterest among the readers.

Conclusion

The project of zeroing into media's ethical responsibilities and the profit motive was preceded by the semantic discourse of media, media ethics and advertising. Issues to do with media ownership and control were also considered to provide background information to the research. The work then looked at the place of sensationalism and advertising in the media. The work maintained that advertising had serious ethical implications, particularly, in Zimbabwe and that there was need to look for other alternatives sources of income which would not take away the media's ethical role to inform, educate and entertain.

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