

CRIME REPORTING IN NIGERIA AND THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The ever-growing interdependency between the Mass Media and the society has placed the institution of journalism in such high pedestal like a colossus. Concerted efforts have been made by the researcher to explore the basic underpinnings into the prospects and challenges of news writing and reporting in a democratic setting and proffer solutions. The research using survey methodologies and content analysis based on media reportage on crime in Nigeria found out that the subject of security for the journalist is paramount to ensure a social responsible crime reporting. It recommends an insurance policy and social security for the journalist with a social responsibility to report truth without fear or favour especially in crime matters.

INTRODUCTION

Everyday experience with the media has shown the inextricable interaction between the media and society. In varying phenomena the relationship between the media and the environment is noted in different societies. According to (Uwakwe, 2002:289). The press helps to maintain, enhance, complicate or even destroy the socio-political and economic systems in recent times.

The press has been part of Nigerian history. From the early times, the press has been part of Nigeria socio-political and economic system rendering a revolutionary function sometimes, and complicating the social process at other times. Indeed, it would be hard to outline the total Nigeria concept with the press.

In Nigeria, just like other societies, “Mass Communication is big business” (Rivers and Schramm, 1969:98). Small businessmen who had exercised right to free press by venturing into big press business have had some toilsome experience which still leaves the business largely in the hands of the elite and successful business moguls. About the mid twentieth century till date, media stakeholders have examined the performance of the press and laid different criteria for a more responsible press. Since ‘Mass’ connote a worldwide concept, the nature of irresponsibility and criteria for a more responsible press stretch from the West to the sub-Saharan Africa and dot like toad stools on communication books. Uwakwe, (2002:289) says “The place of Mass Media in modern society is intriguing and intricate. In Nigeria, the media are impacting on the society in different dimensions”. The thrust of this work is to examine the current nature of press responsibility in Nigeria with inquisitive eyes on reporting and news writing in Nigeria between 1999 – 2007.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Reporting of news and news commentaries in the Nigerian media hinge on many obstacles; which impinge on its effective performance. The efficiency and effectiveness of reporting in a democratic setting especially during the 1999 – 2007 administration was bedridden with a number of hiccups. The question, which, this study seeks to answers, is how the Nigerian media fared in her journalist reportage under this administration. Did the media have a fair deal with this administration? To what extent has reporting fared in trying to rise to many of its challenges.

Styles and ethics

Bearing in mind that ethics is a moral philosophy which govern human conduct as they relate to good or evil, news writing and reporting have strived to hold its golden tenets but have constantly wrestled between this morality and the shore of ethnicity.

The Nigerian press through her reportage, in the last decade, has not been able to extricate herself from the shackles of ethnicity. The twines of ethnicity have progressively entangled the press. Thus, the offshoot is a press whose social functions predicate largely on tribal/ethnic sentiments. This

brings to mind how the press gruesomely could not describe herself on matters bordering on the political fates of Hon. Salisu Buhari, Senators Evan Enwerem, Chuba Okadigbo and Bola Tinubu etc. it is on record that the press took sides on tribal grounds when matters which related to the mentioned people came to fore.

This brings to the fulfilment of Shakespearian prophecies of prominence in society.

*When beggars die
There are no comets seen,
But heavens blaze forth
The death of princess.*

Nwanze, (2000:18) had consistently opined that, "facts are sacred...while opinion is free and profane". Has journalistic ethic such as objectivity, truth, fairness, balance and accuracy been sold on the beds of freebies, junkets, sacred cows, moon lighting, conflict of interest and hoaxes? Ebeze, (2004:42) has this to say:

"The indices of underdevelopment such as penury, impoverishment, family backgrounds, ethic orientation, greed and avarice has dethroned ethics and immorality on the altar of mess of porridge by Nigeria surveyors".

This has no small measure given room to paid press or news commercialization. The consequences of commercialization have far reaching implications. Modern journalism hinges on objectivity and of facts gathered. Truth must be pursued and told no matter whose ox is gored. Meziobi, (20002) supports this assertion when he said that:

"Every journalist must know that the public is entitled to the truth and that only correct information can form the basis of sound journalism and ensure the confidence of the people."

It is true that the mass media are facing difficult times perhaps because of the peculiar nature of underdeveloped Nigeria society. The inability of successive governments to pay her employees optimally is a major straw that broke the camel's back. It is true? It is wrong and unethical for various broadcast stations to collect money from news sources and broadcast such stories as if no money was paid.

Commercialization violates the code of conduct of journalist, which says that it is the duty of journalist to refuse any monetary reward or gratifications for publishing or suppressing news or comment. This shows that the media organisations, which ought to enforce ethics on media practitioner, have indirectly derailed and watered the ground for the preparation of brown envelope syndrome. One of the gruesome consequences of commercialization in news reportage is the erosion of media credibility. Sequel to the above is the infiltration of quacks and mediocre into the prestigious and noble profession. A situation, Onochie (2002) refers to as the amalgamation of professionals and riff-raffs scampering for identity. A pertinent question therefore is, has African journalists and indeed

Nigerian purveyors adhered strictly to the international call of style and ethics? Has the economic or political incapacitation of the masses short-changed the morale and academic consciousness of our journalists to succumb to sub-standards or subservience?

Invasion of privacy and unfairness

The press has in the fourth republic tinkered the privacy of such people. The press in the past served as forum for the exchange of unpleasant personalized comments, criticisms and mudslinging. One such glaring issues is, “figure in the backwash of the news” individuals whose privacy is challenged by news gatherers because they came into the stream of the news not of their own violation, or because of something they have done but because of their relationship with news worthy figure (Rivers and Schramm, 1969:169). For example; how responsible is a journalist who reports the embarrassment of son and father simply because of the religious standing of the father? Does the son not have right to a decorous social life.

The underlying principle of the social responsibility theory is ‘responsiveness’ and ‘responsibility’. This means that the press should be free to perform those functions, which the liberation theory had granted it freedom to perform, but that this freedom should be exercised with responsibility. The theory advocates that if journalists cannot control themselves and make themselves responsible then the government should control them (Okunna 1995:26). This is reflected in what Sandman and his associates (p. 165) say about the theory.

The essence of the social responsibility theory is that the media have an obligation to behave in certain ways. They meet that obligation voluntarily fine, otherwise the government may be forced to make them meet it.

IMPEDIMENTS TO NEWS REPORTAGE

Every human society is replete with an avalanche of voices, which has plagued its morals (Dede 2003). The press has a colossal task to perform in waging wars against bad options. Against this backdrop, a number of obstacles are hiccups in the way of effective practices of ideal journalism and news reportage in Nigeria. They include:

(A) GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION/CONTROL

The authoritarian press theory had explained the dominion, which governments have always played in bringing the media practice under her whims and caprices. McQuail D. (1987) in their bid to provide a fair, balanced and unbiased reporting, the Nigerian press had always met successive Nigerian government at cross roads. This in part explains the reason why the press has succumbed to the heart-of-the moments to comprise their ethical standards. Many journalists are often in the dilemma of choosing between the devil and the deep blue sea. Untimely deaths, assassination of

media men, loss of jobs, kidnap and other such satanic verses had been the portion of many media practitioners who had tried to resist pressure from government and titanic private moguls who wooed them (Babatope, 2005:45). Their refusal had often sent the families of this press men bereaved.

(B) HAZARDS

The Nigerian media encounter other perils and face-off with nature and environment. News men, camera men and editors including broadcast stations managers are constantly faced with environmental hazards like auto crash, accidental discharge from security personnel or even gunmen, untimely deaths and man-made deaths during the course of discharge of their duties.

(C) PENURY

Hardly Chase, one of America’s classical authors of crime and romance once said, ‘you are dead without money’. According to Akinfeleye (1987:62) the absence of three-square meals on the tables of most Nigerian media practitioners, have plunged some of them into a climate of corruption and erosion of media excellence.

The situation is better imagined than told. The dilemma of an editor of a tabloid who was sent to investigate a corrupt chief executive of a manufacturing firm or a government functionary who had been accused of impropriety and other official misconduct. On getting to the place was graced with too numerous, mouth-washing gratifications, amusements, inducements and an outright life monetary gift. Certainly such journalist considering his family background and financial incapacitation will quickly throw overboard his intellectual ethics to help himself with this mess of porridge.

There are other hidden facts on his refusal. Such an editor may not want his wife become a widow and his children fatherless because of the so-called voice of ethics.

In as much as this paper has perused into the prospects of journalistic reportage and it is not myopic to state categorically that most Nigeria purveyors has in recent times, lived up to their expectations. Some have excelled in upholding the tenets and standards of ideal journalism while some have not. Some have enthroned academic and professional excellence and ethical rectitude while others have not. Most of them have eschewed quackery, impersonation and mediocrity in their editorial crusades. The flight to purge our polluted society of its numerous maladies, have sent some seasoned journalists to their untimely graves. The demise of Dele Giwa is a glaring example.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, articulating a general formula for responsible media practice will be hard to implement. This is because societies differ in variegated forms. For instance, a journalist in the U.S. may ignore plea for anonymity (based on security of the source) and publish because of public interest since the state security apparatus is likely to provide protection. The same reason may not work in

sub-Saharan Africa because some states are even incapable of protecting themselves against internal insecurity not to mention that of individual.

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