

THE MEDIA IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Charles Bala Azgaku

Preamble

I wish to commence this paper by thanking and indeed expressing deep appreciation to the organizers of this conference for their kind invitation to me to not only participate but also present a paper. The theme of the conference, aims and objectives and the various relevant topics chosen and the distinguished personalities invited to present papers on contribution to discussions, all add to an interesting event" and a worthy cause. One is therefore happy to make a humble contribution to a commendable effort that aimed at consolidating our democracy through greater empowerment of the media.

Introduction

Journalism is one of the noblest of professions in the world. In the United States of America, Britain, Germany and other countries in Europe, journalism is ranked by sociologists and social psychologists as the fourth noblest profession after medicine, engineering, science and law. The importance of journalism is further emphasized by its description as the fourth estate of the realm, that is after the three organs of government - the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, journalism comes next as the organ for social, political and economic engineering in any country.

The role of journalism as the mirror of societal affairs cannot be over emphasized. However, like every other profession, practitioners of journalism are guided by certain ethics while carrying on their social functions of informing, educating and entertaining the general populace. Objectivity and lack of bias in news reportage are the cardinal principles that should guide an average journalist while carrying on his daily assignment for his news medium. In a situation whereby a journalist allows bias, sentiment of whatever coloration and personal feelings or friendship to determine the stories he files to his medium of mass communication, either electronic or print, such a journalist and the medium he or she represents lose their credibility, integrity and whatever esteem the public had previously held them. Thus, the creed of journalism that states thus: "Comments are Free but Facts are Sacred" and therefore, "when in doubt, leave out".

Nigerian journalists of today do not seem to adhere to this creed. They have allowed personal sentiments, ethno-religious biases and of course acquaintanceship with politicians to inform the writing or relaying of their news reports to their various organizations across the globe. In many instances, financial inducements and other forms of materials gratifications determine the kind of new reports relayed to media organizations by Nigerian Journalists many of whom are in the pay roll of politicians who use them to run down or denigrate their opponents.

Some otherwise credible and well-respected media of mass communication have been smeared by the nefarious and unprofessional activities of their reporters or correspondents.

In order to achieve the yearning and aspirations of journalism, basic principles and media ethics were therefore formulated to guide practitioners in their duty of information dissemination and the promotion and defence of social justice as well as acting as catalysts of change and development.

In communicating about the importance of the Mass Media to any society, Diomansi Bambote (1986) writes:

Doubtless, the evolution of societies is not the exclusive prerogative of the Media but it is illusory to imagine this evolution could occur without the media's participants.

From the above assertion, we know that these media houses - News papers, Magazines, Journals, Radio Stations, Television stations films have the power and capacity to bring about change in the society for the improvement of the quality of life. Friday Je (1986) sufficiently explained this point, when he stated that:

... because the media have the ability to report and inform so effectively, it

could be said with great confidence that as change agents, it has the power to alter, even where resistance is strong the way of life of a community either positively or negatively.

Ultimately, as a result of the enormous responsibilities upon the journalist, he must at all times be accurate, fair, truthful, decent and sincere. Hence, the introduction of the constitutional role of the mass media. *

The Constitutional Role of the Media

The media are described as the fourth estate of the realm, coming after the three arms of government, the Executive Legislature and Judiciary. Like these three, it has constitutionally assigned functions. According to Section 21 of the 1999 Constitution the media "shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people". The fundamental objectives of the state which the media should uphold are also listed in the chapter of the constitution. They include national integration, freedom of association, freedom of worship, freedom of movement and other essential freedoms. Other important rights are the sanctity of human life, freedom from all kinds of discrimination and equality of all before the Law.

If the media are to "uphold these fundamental objectives" of state policy and "hold the government accountable to the people" their duty is to monitor the process of governance and surveillance of the environment in which the governance takes place. In performing this monitoring and surveillance functions, the press embarks on informing and educating the people. This duty is assigned to the media because of the powerful means of communication at their disposal which enables them to reach an ever increasing audience. There is a tacit understanding that for the media to be relevant they are not only purveyors of news and opinions that are directed at their audience but also they carry feedback from their audience - the governed for transmission to government.

Media practitioners in examining their role in a democracy outlined the following:

- i. To convey information to the people with a view to letting them know how the mandate they gave their representatives is being discharged,
- ii. To provide a forum through which the governed could then react to government policies and activities.
- iii. To help strengthen the economic, social and political fabric of the nation,
- iv. To provide informed criticism and viable alternatives to public policies,
- v. To monitor the performance of government with a view to preventing deviation from expressly stated objectives.
- vi. To provide the medium for transmitting knowledge and for educating the populace. And
- vii. TO function as an agent of modernization.

In looking at the above role of the media in a democratic setting, the managers and practitioners of the profession of journalism must be highly trained as intellectuals, imbued with utmost of professional ethics and be patriotic in a globalized world. This takes us to the stage of examining the current state of the mass media in Nigeria.

The State Of The Mass Media In Nigeria

I must start this assessment by recognizing the role played by the mass media particularly the press in the development of Nigeria. The history of the nationalist struggles for independence cannot be complete without stating the part played by the nationalist press. The performance of the media in our civil war of national unity must be given a worthy recognition for upholding the integral survival of Federal Republic of Nigeria. The dogged fight for the establishment of democracy in Nigeria throughout the period of military dictatorship was essentially a press war. Having outlined the noble activism of the media in the past development of Nigeria, we can ask what is the current state of the media in Nigeria?

A summary evaluation of the current state of the mass media in Nigeria will immediately outline three sharp characteristics.

- a) *The Lopsided Structure* of the mass media with a heavy concentration in the South-Western Nigeria.
- b) *The Unprofessionalism and Unethical* mode of operation of the media.
- c) The mass media is *organized as a cartel* right from the proprietors at the top to the vendors at the bottom.

- a) **The lopsided structure of the mass media:** The Nigeria mass media is heavily concentrated in South-Western Nigeria. The Lagos - Ibadan axis alone controls over 80% of the Nigerian mass media. Most of media is in the private hands of people essentially from South-West Surely for any objective observer this is not a healthy state of affairs for the development of a federation and a democracy such as ours.

The unprofessional and unethical mode of operation of the mass media: The heavy concentration of the mass media in South-Western Nigeria and the fact that most of the proprietors of the media are politicians makes the line between politics and journalism impossible to distinguish. This lopsided media has therefore favoured one section of the country than others in term of reportage. Principles such as those of "Fair having", "balanced reporting", "equity", "national interest" etc are completely alien to the majority of the proprietors and practitioners of journalism in the lop-sided media of the South-West. Hence many of the media houses are regularly sued to court for libel. Above all, journalism's code of conduct clearly outlines thirteen solemn declarations that must guide practitioners in the performance of their duties. But do the media abide by these? The result is the ethnicisation of newspapering, as the June 12 crisis, the Ibrahim Buhari, Bola Tinubu and Evan Emverem saga aptly demonstrate. The latest trial was the controversy over "Sharia". The South Western press that was too willing to feature Ibrahim Salisu Buhari, erstwhile Speaker of the House of Representatives for perjury and forgery on the cover of its publication (the News) for quite some time while the crisis lasted did not as much as when Bola Tinubu of Lagos was accused of similar crime. No wonder Professor Jibril Aminu, a former Minister for

Education, (hen Petroleum Resources and currently Nigeria's Ambassador to the United States of America once described Nigerian Journalism as "Terrorist Journalism" Any wonder too why Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka called Nigerian Journalists as "Gutter Journalists" for unnecessarily invading the privacy of highly respected individuals in order to satisfy the whims and caprices of their pay masters. Above all, Onabule observed "Even those of us in the profession will concede the fact that journalism has been invaded and almost completely commandeered by thugs and area boys devoid of societal responsibilities".

Definitely all professions in the world are governed by some ethical rules and the code of practice. Professions such as medicine, law, engineering, architecture etc have similar codes of practice across the world. The profession of journalism in Nigeria is a big exception to this general rule because it is neither guided by moral values nor professional ethics. It is essentially a propaganda tool for fanning ethnic hatred which is not supportive of the survival, integration nor even the sustenance of democracy.

Bisi Akande, Governor of Osun State cried out recently about the blacking out of his government's activities for refusing to pay Journalists in Osogbo a monthly stipend like his predecessor. Akande said few weeks after he assumed office, a voucher reached his table for the payment of journalists. He soon learnt that each journalist in the state was on the payroll of the state government. The Governor put a stop to it. That step irked the journalists who refused to report any achievement of his administration. Perhaps, the greatest culprits of this branch of blackmail journalism are reporters who masquerades under the aegis of beat associations but are actually cartels for blackmail. So notorious were these associations that the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria, a few months ago, banned them.

While many editors have remained untainted in the unfolding media sleaze, there are particular editors who are notorious for their involvement. In media circles, the Sports Writers Association of Nigeria SWAN, one of the first to be established was regarded as the most corrupt. Past leaders of the association were said to have made enough money from

blackmailing their victims to build mansions and set up big business concerns. SWAN, it is believed, wields a great influence on who make it to any team, in any sport, be it football, basketball or even track and field. Sports journalists are also accused of collecting money from players in order to sell them to coaches and soccer fans.

However, Ray Ekpu, President of the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) in an interview with Tell said the banning of beat association is the first step in redressing the situation.

- c) **The Mass Media as a Cartel:** As it has been outlined above the lop-sided concentrations of the Mass Media in one section of the country has aided the development of a monopoly cartel which controls the industry completely. The proprietorship of the mass media, the advert agencies, media executives, the journalists, business in the media industry (e.g. machinery, equipment, computers, newsprint, chemicals, films, etc), distributors and vendors are all organized in a tribal cartel which controls the industry. On the whole the implications of the current unhealthy state of the media is that some parts of the country do not stand a fair chance of being reported objectively, the out-break of ethnic and religious violence are triggered by the unprofessional conducts and practice of the lop-sided mass media. This unfortunate state of affairs is not in the interest of democracy and national development. At this juncture we must ask WHICH WAY FORWARD?

The Way Forward

The era of confrontational and adversarial journalism is gone and the media need to promote the gains of the freedom that goes with a democratic governance to make a reasonable impact in our society.

The primary focus of the media in this dispensation should be on the national interest. They need to bridge the gaps that exist between the various ethnic groups, political parties, religious groups, government and the populace. Most of our communities are boiling and the government and its agencies have not been able to mediate these conflict effectively. The media should aim at channeling communication between various warring communities and the government.

The media in Nigeria must assist in building and maintaining an environment conducive to democracy in the country. It must promote free choice of leadership, especially through the ballot box; respect for the rule law by both the ruler and the ruled; social justice and equity as well as respect for human rights. In carrying out this role, the media must not be merely a "mirror" of society passively reporting events. They must act as the watch dog of citizenry and instigators of positive change.

To effectively perform its role, the media must be independent. This does not mean absence of government involvement but rather that the media should be given the freehand to perform within the ethics of the profession even if they are owned by private individuals.

Media ownership is a public trust. This means whoever owns a media organization does so on behalf of the people and therefore he/she should not use it to destroy any individual or groups. This also means that government must stop regarding media as mere propaganda instrument to disseminate only information favoured or unfavourable to it.

There is need to ensure that the training of journalists is such that prepares them to function positively in promoting development within a culture of democracy. In this wise, major media organizations should maintain in-house training facilities for inculcating in young journalists the virtues of persistence, fairness and other aspects of the accepted ethics of their profession.

Media owners, on their own part need to improve in the working conditions of their employees. The remuneration and welfare package of journalists should be reviewed to avoid their indulging in unethical practices, which is often manifested in the "brown envelope syndrome".

An insurance scheme could also be worked for our practicing journalists to fortify them in their work.

The media must operate in a responsible manner by exercising a strong sense of fair play and a deep respect for truth in the handling of news and opinions.

The media must deliberately work to improve upon its performance criteria so that it can promote orderly succession, especially of civilian administration.

The media could also give voice to the initiatives of individuals, groups and civil societies that are working to ameliorate poverty and bring about general socio-political and economic transformations. This could facilitate collaborations between the media and these groups and also help in sensitizing and empowering the citizenry on the need for a peaceful and democratic culture in Nigeria.

To conclude this essay I recommend to all practicing journalists the advice Ray Ekpu (1990) gave; "journalism is an endeavour in service of the public, good journalism must be just dedicated to that good as they are to high professional standard".

The integrity of the Nigeria media is at stake and the populace is looking up to them to be able to expose corrupt and unjust practices perpetuated by the elected officials. They should not be used as government agents and annexes as was the case under the military regime. In performing their traditional role of informing, educating and entertaining, the media need to go some extra mile in educating the citizenry on their rights to demand good governance from elected officials.

References

1. Bilkisu, Y. "Media and Development in the North". Paper Presented at the Conference on Reporting the North. In Search of Objective Media Held at Auditorium, Arewa House, Kaduna 24th-25th Nov. 1999. P.2.
2. Ekpu, R. (1990) Nigeria's Embattle Fourth Estate". In *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. No. 2 Pp106-116.
3. Mallam Abubalkar S. M. "The Media and Development in Nigeria: The Way Forward". Paper Presented at the Conference on Reporting the North, held at Arewa House, Kaduna 24th-25th Nov. 1999. P.4.
4. Moses, U. "An Appraisal of the Impact of Media Ethics on the Practice of Journalism". In *Benue Valley Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 3 No.2, July - December 2002. P.43.
5. The Pace Maker. "The Media in the Post Transition Period" In *Quarterly Newsletter of the Nigeria Peace Net Work Issue 6*, May 1999.P.6.
6. *Weekly Trust* June 14 - 20, 2002. P. 10.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid. P.44.
9. Ibid.
10. *Weekly Trust* June 14 - 20, 2002. P.10.
11. Ibid.
12. Bilkisu, Y. "Media and Development in the North". P.5.
13. *Tell Magazine* "Corruption in the Media" in No. 18, 6th May, 2002. P.33
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.P.34
17. Ibid.