

THE PLACE OF THE PRESS IN ECONOMIC REHABILITATION AND NATIONAL RELIANCE

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Abstract

This paper looks at both the traditional and the ideal roles of the press in the society; which appear clear from viewing the press as the powerful organ with the capacity of installing and bringing down an unpopular regime. The operation of the press in the contemporary setting is viewed in line with its fettered hands, making it difficult for the press to render its expected role to the nation. Finally, the place of the press in the current drive to rehabilitate the nation's economy and to enthrone self reliance and national pride is contemplated, with the conclusion that given its peculiar position in the society, the organisation should use the process of investigative journalism and other avenues open to it to advise the government on how best to repair and enhance the nation's economy.

Introduction

The press is "the organ of mass media and mass mobilisation which disseminates information to every nook and corner of the society" (Azeez, 1982:13). Keston (1985:31) observes that the press: "can be defined from its functional posture - as an organ for disseminating information of various kinds and elucidating reactions from the society that it is targeted to impact upon...." This definition is more revealing, because it shows that the press is set up to touch a certain audience and to achieve certain ends. Keston goes on to show that some press media are set up to meet certain propaganda ends by the government or the body that set it-up. For this reason, the press do not work with similitude of purpose in view, in all cases, since each-press organisation has the peculiar interest of its founder at heart; as the saying goes that "he who pays the piper dictates the tune".

Ideally, the press is meant to be "a public relation organ" (Finley, 1770:7) set up for the purpose of enlightening the public of government's activities and eliciting public reaction and mood to relay back to the government organs". Finley sees the press as working in partnership with government to enhance governance, for the enthronement of peace, social harmony and progress in the society.

The Press Image

The press is seen in the image or the mental picture of being a partner in progress - assisting the government of the land to disseminate its information to the governed and collecting and relaying back results of achievements of government policies to those in government. Both government and the governed see in the press, which is expected to enjoy full confidence from the two sides, as confidante and friend. This peculiar position of the press places it in a position to be unbiased and impartial in its discharge of this very important role.

Secondly, the press is a very powerful organ of both construction and destruction. In this light, the press can be seen as able to do and undo; to set up a regime, and, equally with a single stroke of the pen, send the regime reeling from its delicate balance. Hence it is often said that "the pen is mightier than the sword". This view is from the recognition that many unpopular regimes have been brought down by the press; through their acidic reporting of events and government activities.

It is known that some unpopular governments have continued to thrive owing to "the jaundiced and lopsided reporting of government activities" (Opeke, 1992:12). This issue leads to another discussion

of press activities in the country - press pander with corruption.

The Press in Action

It has been observed earlier that press organisations are set up for various purposes. The press constitutes of the electronic and the print. According to Okon. (1996:2) electronic press include both the Radio and the Television organs, while the print consist of the newspaper publications". Up till recently, the press in Nigeria and other African and third world countries were preponderantly owned by government which influenced the press to publish and broadcast only news items favourable to government in power. Independent press have been known to be more balanced in reportage of events and in critical analyses of government programmes and projects. It would not be out of place here, to recall the pre-independence days when fiery journalists like Dr. Azikiwe fought with the pen against the colonial government, and contributed immensely in winning political independence for both Ghana and Nigeria. These were the days of *West African Pilot* and *the Cornel*, both published by Dr. Azikiwe.

To diversify the broadcast industry, the federal government, in the past five years has granted operational licence to independent press to operate in the country. This has given rise to a fairly large number of private electronic and print press coming into existence.

Press Problems in Nigeria

The first question that comes to mind in this issue is press freedom - how free is the press in Nigeria? Trying to answer this question, one - time Minister for Information, (who for obvious reasons will not be named here) says evasively that "the press in Nigeria, is as free as it can be", (Punch, 2002:3). This is a diplomatic assertion that the press cannot be free to publish whatever it sees or wants to publish. It must publish "his master's voice" since the piper must satisfy him that pays him. Even the so-called independent press are not free from the harassment of the law-enforcement arm of government whenever they publish or broadcast items not favourable to government in power.

Another press problem in Nigeria is that some members of the press accept the brown envelope and play to the gallery, rather than publish the truth and shame the devil. However, it is also known that some fearless journalists like Dele Giwa, and to a lesser extent, Amakri of 1970's have had to pay dearly (for exposing the government) from the hands of Machiavellian rulers. Hence, some press people have decided to accept "a shut - up package" and keep mute in a country where one who sticks out his neck gets cut off.

Also, press members have often complained of poor remuneration and paucity of equipment and materials to enhance their operation. Nevertheless, the press can enhance economic rehabilitation and national self reliance as can be seen below.

The Place of the Press in Economic Rehabilitation and National Reliance

Apart from its other traditional role of reporting disseminating government programme and educating the society, the press can sensitise and sustain government action towards economic rehabilitation of the nation, through the investigative journalism. This implies going into the society to investigate, analyse and advise government on how best to rehabilitate the nation's ailing economy. The press has an array of intellectuals and also has access to the academic who can be interviewed on various aspects of both economics and politics. These views and findings could be collated, classified and passed over to government - both the executive and legislative arms - for necessary action. Government owned press should include this sort of programme in their annual work-plans and also incorporate the budgetary requirements in their annual budgets, both at the state and national levels.

Secondly, the press should invite seasoned technocrats to speak, in a form of personality profiles, on issues and trends involved in economic rehabilitation and national self reliance. There could be a form of conferences or seminars organised by the press, where experts are invited as guest speakers. Ministers and commissioners in charge of information should take this suggestion seriously. The press are in the best advantageous position to see what those in the government may not be able to see. It is therefore an indispensable onus on the part of the press to call attention of government to these relevant issues involved. The ultimate, gain is to see the nation's economy repaired so as to enthrone peace, economic development, national self reliance, national pride and social justice.

Conclusion

The theme of this conference which is education for economic rehabilitation and reliance -offers a vantage point for the press to be re-awakened to its expected role in the society. This paper recognises the important position which the press occupies, owing to its powerful image of the wielder of the pen. No government wants to contend with the press or to go outright to antagonise it or disregard its views. The press should not, also, go outright to antagonise the government of the land. The government on one hand, and the press on the other, should work in complementary roles, to achieve the needed economic progress and lasting peace, stability and economic security, which are sine qua non for national self reliance and pride.

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