

Professionalism and Journalism in Nigeria: Emerging Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The study analyse professionalism and Journalism in Nigeria: Emerging Issues and Challenges. Journalism as an institution is a significant player in socio-economic, political and cultural development of Nigeria. However, records have shown that some journalists carry-out their duties in an unprofessional way thereby drawing attention to public domain about questions about place of professionalism in Nigeria's journalism practice. it is in respect of critical functions of journalists in Nigeria that this paper intends to see how journalists ought to operate in order to conform with the professional rules of engagement. Also, the study shall be within the theoretical framework of utilitarianism theory and social responsibility. It is the position of this study that high level of discipline and professionalism is expected from the Nigerian journalists, so that it can sustain its respect and operate according to global best practices

Key terms: Challenges, professionalism, media, industry.

Introduction

Journalism in Nigeria plays a significant role in Nigeria's development politically, socially, culturally and economically. The people have so much respect and confidence in the institution and depended on it for their day to day supply of news on passing events. The journalist's versions of reality have a significant influence on the way in which politics, culture and society are generally understood (Jacobs, 1981). In the same vein, the society realities have great significance on the way the pen pushers are understood. It is therefore logical to conclude that journalism as an institution in Nigeria have a significant role to play in the society and this can only be achieved by high level of discipline and professionalism in the industry.

From time immemorial, journalists in Nigeria are often being criticised on how stories are distorted to favour a particular interest. Precisely from 1999, accusing fingers have been

pointed to Nigerian practitioners in one way or the other in the manner which political, economic, cultural and religious issues are disseminated especially since coming of democratic governance in Nigeria. According to M'bayo (2006), the problem of partisan, biased or ethnic reporting is a deep one and goes back to the days of the anti-colonial press.

It should be noted that the issue of professionalism in Nigerian journalism is considered important one to warrant mention in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 22 clearly which spelt out the constitutional role of Nigerian journalists. However, it is frightening that reports which are well documented indicates that many news, articles, reports, editorials, news commentaries etc. are deliberately manipulated and as such public opinion often skewed (Akpan 2001).

Fundamentally, the Nigerian journalism incorporates the print, broadcast and online journalism. Specifically, it embodies newspapers, magazines, television, radio, films and social media as well. With these potentials, the Nigerian journalists have a wide and mass coverage through the use of several mediums); the industry's audience and readership is extensive. This power of the media, in the hands of journalists, according to Lynch (2005), *due to their extensive influence and potentials, the media as a social institution has incredible reach ability and lobbying potential. With great powers come great responsibilities.*

Journalism as a Profession

According to Odunewu (2003: 3), describes profession as *an occupation requiring advanced education and training, involving intellectual skills as in medicine, law, pharmacy, engineering, etc.* From this definition, it could be argued that, for journalists to live to their expectations in the society and to require appropriate knowledge and skills to perform those functions as prescribed by the Constitution of Nigeria; journalists must be properly trained in the art and science of journalism.

Therefore, a journalist cannot be said to be professional until he or she is virtuous. A virtuous journalist is the one who has respect for and tries to live by the cardinal virtues which Plato prescribes in *The Republic* (Merrill, 1982). The cardinal virtues which Plato prescribes in *The Republic* are: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice.

1. **Wisdom:** Wisdom can be defined as the correct application of knowledge. It is what gives direction to moral life and it is the rational, intellectual base for any system of ethics. Wisdom is partly natural and partly acquired. It is acquired through the following ways: maturing, life experiences, study, association, etc.
2. **Courage:** Courage is needed to resist the temptation to do the wrong thing, that is, deviate from the path of wisdom. In other words, it helps a person to pursue the goal which wisdom has helped set for him or her.
3. **Temperance:** This is the virtue which demands reasonable moderation. It helps people to avoid fanaticism in the pursuit of any objective, that is, knowing where to apply the brakes, as it were.
4. **Justice:** Justice is the virtue which considers a person's 'deservingness'. It refers more specifically to a person's social relation. All men should be treated equally.

Journalism Practice in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

It should be noted that the Nigerian journalism actually started earlier than the historic proclamation or inauguration of Nigeria as a nation. From records, Nigerian journalism was not at the beginning guided by any laws or regulations. This means that there was none in place to define the requirement, composition and operations of the players in the industry. As it were, Nigerian journalism was dominated, from the beginning by people drawn from several pools. According to Agbaje (1992:42), *practitioners included the commercially frustrated local elites driven out of business by unfair competition from European monopolists, the unemployed, those sacked from jobs in ailing European firms, dropouts from other professions, etc.*

This implies that the forerunners of the profession, apart from the fact that they lacked the basic educational prerequisites in the field of journalism; they did not know or even see the job as a profession. Early practitioners went into the profession either to make ends meet or to obtain a meal ticket. And this perception continued, even, after independence in 1960 (Agbaje, 1992). No doubt, the early group of journalists that attended formal school of journalism equally harboured the notion that journalism was not a profession. This affected their output as well as their disposition and self-esteem among their colleagues in other professions because there was no way they could compare themselves with pharmacists, medical practitioners, lawyers, engineers, architects etc. that have formidable unions (Momoh, 2005).

Hence, there is no denying the fact that Nigerian journalists often claim that having carried out their duties in respect to objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, etc. qualifies them as professionals, but this is far from the truth. In fact, it is doubtful to claim that Nigerian journalists practice and belong to a profession in the real sense of it. Momoh (2005:11) opines that: *A profession is qualified to be one only when It can be identified by the body of knowledge to be imbibed by those who would be its membership register, disciplinary body that would enforce the code.*

In an attempt to evaluate Nigerian journalism as it is today, especially as presently seen, considering the above requirements, one will agree with the view given by Adaja (2011) that *Nigerian journalism cannot fully refer to as a profession.* Although, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) parades Codes of Conduct in which in its Article 1(i) referred to the Union as a professional body to be imbibed by its members. Also, the membership provision was so loose that anybody that has anything to do with media organisation calls him or her a journalist.

In addition, the practice of journalism in Nigeria has been characterised by flaws that had prevented it from being referred to as a profession. At the inception, the Nigerian journalism space was occupied by practitioners who neither saw themselves as professionals nor made professionalism their watchword. For instance, the first newspaper in Nigeria, *Iwe Iroyin Fun Ara Egba ati Yoruba*, was established by Rev. Henry Townsend who never had the opportunity of attending a school of journalism (Momoh, 2005).

Again, the liberalisation and commercialisation policy of the Federal Government of Nigeria of the 1980s and 1990s threw a lot of challenges to the professional standards of journalism practice in Nigeria. The policy made all the forms news coverage to be evaluated from the commercial point of view. The impact of the policy became noticeable on journalists' sense of news judgement, especially in the broadcast media. News events not sponsored were hardly aired. According to Oso (2012):

The journalist is not allowed the autonomy and detachment required for

the practice of his trade. His professional judgement has been compromised.

The sale of news is killing professionalism in Nigerian broadcast journalism.

of a truth, commercialisation of broadcasting has contributed to the death

of serious journalism in Nigeria broadcasting.

Furthermore, the issue of role conflict (that is dual roles) has seriously affected the output of the average Nigerian journalist. The oscillation between the social responsibility theory has made journalism in Nigeria to be in a perpetual state of flux. Journalists usually engage in a ‘constant war of independence’ (i.e. between two words of ‘patriotic journalism (perspective)’ and ‘professional journalism (perspective)’. This ‘crisis’ of identity, has marred the integrity and credibility of journalism. According to Tsfaty and Libio (2003) as cited by Zandberg and Neiger (2005:139): *Journalists’ identities are not fixed and clear but fluid and unstable, and we see journalists as neither member of the professional community-but as moving between them.*

Professionalism and Ethical Standards

There is no doubt that all journalists would like total freedom and autonomy to publish or broadcast what they like. But considering the great powers they wield in the shaping of the society, the freedom and the autonomy they want must be tempered by commensurate sense of responsibility, considering the fact that modern media’s all pervasive reach touches virtually all aspects of life (Franklin, 2006). Egbon (2001), further add that *it is time someone undertook the task to fill the ethical vacuum which is at present occupying the hearts of most media establishments.*

From the above views expressed by Egbon (2001), it is apt to state that ethical issues have become very sensitive issues in modern society. In Nigeria for instance, corruption is one of the nagging issues in the media. A journalist is not supposed to take or accept bribe to suppress a story. Journalists are also not supposed to disclose their sources of information to anybody. Plagiarism and many other ethical issues are addressed by professional bodies in Nigeria. This study at this juncture shall peep into the Code of Ethics for Nigerian journalist approved by the Nigerian Press Organisation and published by Nigerian Press Council to appreciate critical ethical issues in the Nigerian mass media.

Journalism entails a high degree of public trust. To earn and maintain this trust, it is morally imperative for every journalist and every news medium to observe the highest professional and ethical standards. In the exercise of these duties, a journalist should always have healthy regard

for the public interest (Franklin, 2006) According to Adaja, (2012), *truth is the cornerstone of journalism and every journalist should strive diligently to ascertain the truth of every event. Conscious of the responsibilities and duties of journalists as purveyors of information, the Nigerian journalists, give to itself this Code of Ethics.*

Therefore, professionalism is the conduct, aims, or objectives that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person. Professionalism also describes the qualities, skills, competence, and behaviours that are expected of a person in a given profession. According to Egbujor (2015, p.29), the identity of every profession is founded on standard principles. Ethical values co-exists practically in all professions in order to ensure standard practice. Ethical standards in a profession are ‘rules governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession and exposes the professional obligations, guides and identity of journalists in journalism practice’ (Patching &Hirsts as cited in Egbujor, 2015, p.29).

In other words, Egbujor sees journalistic profession as ‘norms and standards that constitute the kind of outputs that are generally recognized as quality journalism’, these definitions expand the scope of journalistic professionalism to include contextual issues assessing the performance of the media and the quality of the information they convey to the public (Egbujor, 2015, p.31).

Causes of Unethical Practices

There been complaints that journalists in Nigeria are becoming unprofessional in the way and manner they conduct themselves especially in their work environments. The principles of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice which is a requirement for good reportage and professionalism have according to many scholars compromised with its attendant consequences. Under-listed points are some of the causes of unethical practices that deserves to be mentioned:

According to Bankole (2002), it has been identified that over-commercialisation of news violates professional standards of journalists, which states:

It is the duty of the journalist to refuse any reward for publishing or suppressing views or comments. With the zeal to make money, many new organisations have lost their focus on investigative journalism. This has led to loss of variety in the news, monotony, etc. many have

lost their mission turning to praise singing and propaganda, which has due consequences for the Nigerian society.

Ownership issue is another point to note. It is a familiar saying in the journalism parlance that *he who pays the piper dictates the tune*. This is apt and correct because the media would not want to lose a major customer; the media as part of the measure to stay afloat would do anything within its reach to satisfy such customer by projecting their views. On the part of the clients, they may dictate how and what he or she wants out of the news packaging of the media house. That may not be enough, it may extend to dictating to the media what makes news, and the process suppressing or distorting the opposing views. These scenarios are often displayed during political or electioneering campaigns as contestants often buy over one media house or the other, invariably at every news hour is an opportunity to praise the ‘client’ and emasculate his or her opponents.

Again, in Udeze (2012, p.73), he stated that there is a close relationship between corruption and unethical practice quoting Webster Unabridged Dictionary (2001, p.456), he noted that being unethical means *the act corrupting or state of being corrupt, moral perversion, depravity*. He further stated that to be corrupt according to same source is to be guilty of dishonest practices such as bribery, lacking integrity, crooked etc. Udeze (ibid) further argued that based on the definition, corruption among journalists means all those that media practitioners engage in that and it contravenes the ethics of the profession.

In addition, affiliation is issue that affect professionalism. This has been a major challenge to professionalism in the media industry in Nigeria. The impunity as regards this problem is even worrisome in government-owned media houses. For instance, Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (Radio Nigeria), and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) will sing praises of federal government policies and that of officials. The state-owned are also guilty of this. Even the privately owned cannot be fully exonerated from this situation. For instance, African Independent Television (AIT) is believed to have sympathy for Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Television Continental (TVC) believed to be owned by Chief Ahmed Bola Tinubu, the National Leader of All Progressive Congress (APC).

Lest we forget, there is need to look into professionalism in journalism and other professions with intent to make a comparison. In contrast with medicine and law for instance, media

professionalization does not include standards for professional training and licensing. Other professions require or mandate that practitioners receive long and closely monitored professional training. This is not the case with journalism at least in Nigeria. For instance, medical doctors and lawyers undergo from four (4) to ten (10) years specialised training in addition to completing four (4) years of college. But that cannot be said of journalism. The media practitioners are unwilling to set requirements for professional training and have strongly resisted efforts to license journalists (Baran & Davies, 2006:132). However, Akinfeleye (2005), have argued that there is no total freedom anywhere in the world. Hence, journalists must practice within the confine of the ethics and code of conduct.

In the same vein, the issue of brown envelope cannot be washed away. Brown envelope as fondly called should in whatever guise be avoided by journalists because it tends to compromise the professional calling, integrity, and rule of thumb. Professionalism entails uprightness, integrity, accountability, truth, fairness and balance reportage. These aforementioned points cannot succeed where brown envelope is the order of the day because it could influence the objectivity in news writing. Freedom of objectivity is out rightly compromised by gratifications as noted by Duyile (2005:108), *Journalists must understand that compromising their morals and ethical principles can be a greater threat to press freedom than anybody of oppressive laws.*

Public trust in all media professionals might be shaken if too many professionals in every field, including journalism, have been reluctant to identify and censor colleagues who violate professional standards. To do so is often seen as admitting that embarrassing problem exists. Public trust in all media professionals might be shaken if too many people are barred from practice. Professional societies tend to operate as closed group in which members are protected against outside threats and criticism, (Baran & Davies, 2006: 131).

It is also noteworthy to state that that the stakeholders in the field of journalism should set up policies that guide how the media works. For instance, in print you have editorial policies where you state reasons for establishing the newspapers while in the case of radio and television you have the mission statement. The philosophy advanced by the owners of the organisations control the media. This statement was corroborated by Fab-Ukozor (2011: 291-292), when he stated that the situation is such that the few rich ones who own the media are either business

friends or unprofessional journalists who appreciate the position of the *fourth power* but are reluctant to go headlong in search of truth due to government stance of intimidation and oppression. As a result, practitioners in the country are often faced with a conflict emanating from the need to protect their proprietor's interests and the need to serve public interests.

Therefore, there is no doubt that influence of ownership structure of the media is a signpost for direction of its editorial contents which is considered as another crucial reason that has militated against adherence of ethical standard by media managers. The ownership or media outlets have great influence in the direction of its editorial contents (Sadler, 2011). A clear example is in Nigeria where government owned newspapers, radio and television stations never write or report against the government in power, while the media practitioners in Privately owned media never go against the desires of the owners.

Also, poor salary structure and insurance policy to cater for the journalists is another challenge faced by journalists. Most journalists in Nigeria are poorly paid or under paid, this is even common in the privately owned ones, in addition to poor condition of service.

Furthermore, Fab-Ukozor (2011: 292) posits that the desire of the owners of the media to make profit from their business enterprises is also a major challenge. She explained that finding a mid-ground between being socially responsible and the need to make and maximize profit at all cost has increasingly been a threat to needed focus by journalists and the media owners to effectively carry out their functions. This is so because the media owners are concerned with how to generate money or revenue from their clients or sources; media organisations often show, surprisingly, an otherwise intolerable sensitivity to the feelings of big business at expense of editorial matters. In this situation, editors generally are trapped between professionalism and unprofessional practices. This indicates that over commercialisation of the media is also an issue and challenge.

There is no gain saying that media practitioners most times have been found wanting in not complying with the laid down rules and regulations. Several accusing fingers have been pointed to number of Nigerian journalists about showing weakness in resisting the temptation of materialism which is usually presented in the form of bribery commonly called 'brown envelop' syndrome in Nigeria.

Regulation of Journalism Practice in Nigeria

Today, there is hardly any profession that does not deserve to be regulated by laws and ethics. The reason is that no matter how good a profession is to the society, some unscrupulous individuals will use it in a negative manner which may cause harm to the society it is supposed to defend and protect. Mass media just like others is not excluded from regulation. However, it is noteworthy to state that because of the peculiar nature of the mass media as vehicle for free expression, which is a fundamental human right, government is usually careful to jump at regulating the media only to the extent consistent with the expectations of a democratic society.

Regulation means that journalists are checked by laws and ethics. Specifically, regulation according to Malemi (1999: 32) comes in form of constitutional provision, statutes, ethical guidelines, and informal restraints. These regulations embody mass communication law, media law and press law which often used interchangeably means: *The law governing the receiving and dissemination of ideas and information, the media of mass communication, the role of press and the writing public, their rights and their duties to the private individual and the state in general* (Malemi, *ibid*).

Mass communication ethics on the other hand is self-imposed and self-enforced. Mass communication ethics is therefore the set of moral guidelines which the mass communication practitioners have articulated to guide their professional conduct. Ethics compels the professional to consider his or her basic principles and values, his or her obligations to himself or herself and to others. It also allows professional to decide how to live, how to conduct his or her professional affairs, how he or she thinks, act and react to the people and issues around him or her. Merrill (*ibid*) defines journalistic ethics as: *The branch of philosophy which helps journalists to determine what is right to do, by giving the journalist standards by which he can judge actions to be right or wrong, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible.*

Some Factors that Militate Professionalism in Media Practice

Malemi (Op cit.), further argued that Codes of Ethics cannot bring the desired result if these unlisted obstacles to objectivity are not put into consideration:

1. Limited Space: In all mass media, reporters and editors do not have the space to include all the materials they would want to include always. This is particularly so in

newspapers where limited space often results in the abridging of stories during make up. On radio and television also, the anchor must abridge a statement as soon as he receives the signal that the programme must come to an end. In essence, the sudden end of a story or a narration for space constraints may result in the inability to present all sides of an issue fairly and equally, thus undermining objectivity.

2. **Laziness of the Reporter:** If a reporter is not resourceful enough, he may not take enough pain to obtain all the sides of a controversy. Objectivity suffers thereby.
3. **Lack of Openness of the News Source:** Some news sources would not open up to the reporter for one reason or the other. A lady in a divorce suit, a jilted lover, a fired employee, or the victim of an ugly incident such as robbery, fraud, rape etc. may find it difficult to talk to the press. And this robs the reporter of the ability to present the facts objectively.
4. **Conflict of Interest:** Concept of interest ranges from accepting gifts and travel junkets to political involvement and all forms of divided loyalty. If a journalist's conscience has been compromised in any way, it is impossible for him to maintain objectivity either as a reporter, editor, or programme presenter on radio and television or as a producer or even a contributor.
5. **Advertiser Control:** Since substantial amount of media revenues comes from advertising it follows that that pressure from advertisers is also a fact of life. There is no doubt that pressures affect the effort of the media to present all sides of an issue fairly and balanced.
6. **Government Pressure:** Pressure from the government can come in form of written and unwritten laws. National security must be protected at all cost and government policies sold to the people. For this reason, government is usually impatient with the media when they do not show sufficient understanding and sympathy with government position, they would abdicate their responsibility to the people.

Theoretical Framework

The Utilitarianism Media Theory

This study uses utilitarianism theory which has Jeremy Bentham and J.S Mills as its proponents. The theory is based on the premise that 'ultimately it is the owners who through

their wealth, determine the style of journalism we get; what makes something good or bad, right or wrong, is that it produces the greatest number of people' (Sadler, 2011).

The Social Responsibility Media Theory

Another theory that is suitable for this study is the Social Responsibility Theory. This study adopted social responsibility and development media theories as its theoretical framework with the assumption that it will explain the concept of professionalism of the media in a given situation. The social responsibility theory for instance is one of the six (6) normative theories of the press which argues that the media must at all times operate unhindered by control from the government on one hand, and on the other serve the people without fear or favour.

McQuail, (2010) gave this following as the major underlining principles of the theory:

1. The media have the obligation to society, and media ownership is a public trust.
2. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
3. The media should be free but self-regulated.
4. The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct.

Conclusion

The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for journalists to be above board and abiding by the best global practices. This call is necessary considering the enormous power inherent in the media as such cannot be allowed to be abused by people with selfish interests. Also, the study draws attention to the fact that journalism just like any other professions such as law, medicine, engineering etc. requires laws and self-imposed regulations to guide its affairs.

There is no denying the fact that integrity is the hall mark of a professional journalist. Integrity naturally earns societal respect while the opposite of it would attract disrespect among the people who he or she interacts with. Akinfeleye (ibid) argues that every worthwhile profession must have integrity to maintain its relevance to the society it serves, adding that profession integrity is derived from the philosophical foundation of the professional Code of Ethics for and by the profession itself. As a result, Akinfeleye concludes that journalistic integrity is a derivation of the journalistic code of ethics.

In addition, if journalist in Nigeria throws away professionalism in their practice, then they cannot effectively discharge their constitutional duties of monitoring government as posited by Harold Lasswell (1948); making it accountable to the people and upholding the fundamental objectives of a given society. However, being absolutely objective is easier said than done. But one salient attribute about journalism is that the media are always under watchful eyes of the public

Finally, a professional worthy of its salt should strive for journalistic independence. Independence in journalism means freedom from all obligations that might interfere with the fidelity to the public interest. An honest journalist therefore must not be seen to promote any private or corporate interest which is unacceptable to the general public. Also, partisanship in editorial comment which a journalist deliberately make is a clear departure from the truth and not in the spirit of good journalism. It is instructive to note that all decisions on news coverage, news content, slant and depth should be taken by the editorial team rather than being imposed by outsiders.

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