

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES ON JOURNALISM/PRESS/MEDIA: AN ETHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Journalism practice in Nigeria is characterized by a myriad of issues. Adopting the social responsibility theory of the press, the paper undertakes a look at only the ethical issues of conflict of interest, seducers, accuracy and fairness, sectionalism/diversity, integrity and deception among other ethical issues which besiege the professional. The paper warns the journalist to be ethically conscious so that he cannot drag his name and that of his profession into the mud thereby putting the unity and progress of the country into jeopardy.

Introduction

Journalism all over the world is not completely immune to issues regardless of the type of government in existence, the economic policy on ground as well as the type of environment it operates in. In Nigeria, the profession is characterized by a myriad of issues, which this paper alone cannot unravel holistically. Among the available issues which journalism, press or mass media face- in our current Nigerian society include legal or constitutional issues, ethical issues, unfavourable government policies, environmental hostility and so on. These issues, no doubt impact negatively or positively on the performance of journalism. Although the theme of this paper as coined by this conference is: "Contemporary issues in Journalism/Press/Media", we, in this paper, are limiting our scope to only certain fundamental ethical issues which characterize the media industry with Nigeria in focus. On this note the paper will be examined under the following sub-themes:

- (i) Journalism/Press/Media: Conceptual Clarification,
- (ii) Theoretical Framework,
- (iii) Journalism in Nigeria: Ethical Issues,
- (iv) Recommendations,
- (v) Conclusion.

Journalism/Press/Media: A Conceptual Clarification

Ours is a culture, an academic culture, which demands on us a review of the literature of any given concept to enhance comprehension. On this note, it should be understood that there is no any universally held definition of the concepts of journalism, press and the mass media. In an attempt to provide an answer to the question of what journalism is, Wainwright (1978:1), posits: "Journalism is information. It is communication. It is events of the day distilled into few words, sounds or pictures, processed by the mechanics of communication to satisfy the human curiosity of a world that is always eager to know what is new".

From the definition above, it can be deduced that journalism as a profession or field is concerned with communicating with people in society about events which happen in the world or society they live in through different means.

According to Kamath (1980:4), journalism is a business, profession, craft or trade. He, on this note, consequently writes:

It is fashionable to say that journalism is a profession like law or medicine or engineering. A profession it is, but at the same time, it is a craft to be

learnt. And woe to the publisher journalist who is ignorant of the principles of business management.

The definition is acceptable in the sense that journalism needs the patronage of people in society in order to remain in existence. The word press should not be perceived as being different from journalism. It is also concerned with the production and dissemination of information through newspapers, magazines, radio, television and so on.

Concerning the mass media, Dominick (1999:25) states:

"When we talk about the mass media of television, radio, newspaper, magazines, sound recording and film, we will be referring to the people, policies, the organisation and the technology that go into producing mass communication".

Without the mass media, mass communication which according to Sambe (2004) is the process of communicating with countless people in society cannot take place. The mass media, therefore, are the agents of mass communication. People who manipulate the mass media are called media men. This is equally applicable to people who are in journalism/press. They are simply referred to as journalists/pressmen. This points to the fact that the three concepts of journalism/press/media are one. They are not different from one another especially in this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The presenters have adopted the Social Responsibility Theory of the press for this work. The social responsibility theory of the press came into existence as a result of the weaknesses, which characterized the Libertarian theory or free press theory.

Consequent upon the drawbacks of the libertarian theory, a commission, popularly known as the Hutchins Commission on freedom of the press was set up in the United States of America (USA) in 1947 to reexamine the concept of press freedom as enshrined, in the libertarian theory. Folarin (1998:27), pointing out the problems associated with the free press theory explains:

This was because the so-called free market ideas had failed to guarantee press freedom and yield the expected benefits to society. Rather, the commercial development of the press and the unforeseen technology had tended to limit access to the media for individuals and to concentrate media power in the hands of a few businessmen (advertisers) and media professionals who had the means to set up media empires.

As a result of these excesses which the libertarian theory subjected the press to people, especially the Americans lost confidence in the press. They therefore, in order to restore the confidence felt that the press had to be subjected to certain social standards but at the same time ensuring preservation of its freedom.

Siebert et al (1956:74), Kunezick (1988:48) and McQuail (1987:116) in Folarin (1998:28), postulated six specific functions of the press, which are:

- To serve the political system by making information discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible.
- To inform the public to enable it to take self-determined action.
- To protect the rights of the individuals by acting as watchdog over the government.
- To serve the economic system; for instance, by bringing the buyers and sellers through the medium of advertising.

- To provide "good" entertainment, whatever "good" may mean in the culture at any point in time.
- To preserve financial autonomy in order not to become dependent on special interest and influences.

The Social Responsibility Theory is fundamentally anchored on self-regulation by the journalist. Under this theory, while the journalist is free to carry out his responsibility or duty of informing, educating and entertaining the public's, he is expected to be regulated by his conscience. His conscience, in this regard, should guide him and prevent him from embarking on obnoxious practices that will put his society on the track of underdevelopment. His conscience should tell him what is good for his profession and his society. This theory appears to be inclined to Unitarianism, which holds that the journalist's action should be capable of making many people in society to be happy. This, undoubtedly and unambiguously explains the importance of this theory to this work. Ethics in itself is about self-regulation. It is about determining what is good and bad. It is individually imposed. It is not societally imposed.

Journalism in Nigeria: Ethical Issues

No amount of research by anybody, regardless of his professional and academic position in the

field of journalism can uncover exhaustively all the ethical issues prevalent in journalism. It is in recognition of this reality that we are still groping for ethics in journalism according to Goodwin and Smith (1994).

This situation appears so because of the fact that ethical issues are individually inclined; they are subjective; they are determined by journalist's conscience. An action that will be considered right by this journalist may be interpreted and condemned by others. On a general note, a culture or behaviour that is highly cherished by one section in Nigeria, may be highly detestable in another section. This is a reality, which needs no proof for acceptance. Fortunately, while the search for all ethical issues in journalism is still on, we have with us already the plainest ones which include conflict of interest, seducers, accuracy and fairness, sectionalism/diversity, integrity and deception and so on.

Conflict of Interest

The journalist responsibility to his society is to provide truthful information on things that happen within and outside it. This is the greatest responsibility of the journalist to his society. The journalist, in order to live up to this expectation is required professionally and naturally to be an independent person, belonging only to his profession. The journalist is expected to separate himself clearly from other associations, relationships and anything that may be a stumbling block to his ability to serve his society effectively. In this regard, Black, Steele and Barney (1995:91) state:

Journalism carries a terrific responsibility in our society, for no other profession does what journalism does. No other individuals have the primary and constitutionally protected role of educating the public in a meaningful way on significant issues. To abdicate that responsibility, to put awards or friendships or self-interest or economic gain ahead of public benefit, is unacceptable and unethical.

Belonging to any association, group, organisation or establishing a relationship which can be annihilating to the journalist's pure responsibility to his society is bad. The fear is that as a human being, the journalist may not report critically or objectively on issues especially negative ones that involve the association he belongs to. A journalist who is a board member of Aondo Oil Company Plc, for instance, may sacrifice truth in his report on the activities of the company, which are inimical. Aware of the drawbacks associated with a journalist involving himself in other bodies or associations, The Times, one of the magazines in the United States of America, in Goodwin and Smith (1994:84) states:

"The integrity of The Times requires that its staff members avoid employment or any other undertakings, obligations, relationships or investments that create or appear to create a conflict of interest with their professional work for the Times or otherwise comprise the Times' independence and reputation".

The journalist, as could be noticed above, is expected to shun any appointment. He is expected to shun any relationship that will temper with the independence of his conscience so that he can truthfully serve the interest of the publics.

In Nigeria and Africa generally, conflict of interest has become a serious problem, which has come to stay with us. We have many political journalists in our midst. Some have established their papers specifically to pursue political gains. The Concord Newspaper of the late M. K. O. Abioja is a good example. Almost all the state-owned media are politically established. They cannot inform Nigerians adequately on issues that affect them or their owners. Most journalists are inclined to one party or the other; some have ended up taking political appointments thereby doing all they can to-serve the interest of their party or their employer instead of sticking to their profession and serving the publics honestly.

Seducers

Freebies, Junkets and Perks: All these concepts refer to one thing; they are simply known as seducers. Put in a simpler perspective, they are called gifts. It is a culture among Nigerians or African or in short, among human beings to offer gifts. Gifts, on a general note are not just offered; they are offered either to encourage the recipient to stick to a particular good act or performance or they are offered in order to influence the recipient to carry out a task in favour of the person who offers them. The journalist in our society, is on this note, often presented with gifts in different ways by politicians, companies, public officials, public relations practitioners of organizations. Affirming to this, Goodwin and Smith (1994: 15) states:

"Many journalists accepted Christmas presents from the people they covered. Getting tickets to theaters, Circuses or baseball games was common. Traveling free on the train or plane with the political candidate or sports team you were

covering was encouraged".

Freebies or gifts, as earlier noted are not just offered to a journalist; they are offered to influence his decisions, and in most cases distort facts in favour of the one who offers them. Sambe and Ikoni (2004:184), state clearly that, "in Nigeria we have the idea of "Brown envelopes" which many have code-named "PR" to show appreciation to or induce favours from journalists"

Accuracy and Fairness

Accuracy, according to Black et al (1995:53) means "getting it right". Fairness, they hold means "pursuing the truth with both vigour and compassion and reporting information without favouritism, self-interest or prejudice".

The journalist is expected to portray individuals and issues with a basic sense of open-mindedness, avoiding biased reporting, stereo typical portrayals and unsubstantiated allegations. The question to pose here, however, is, can a journalist be very accurate in his reportage of issues? In response to this question, Black et al (1995), further observe:

"To be sure, journalism can never tell the full truth in every story, because facts compete against each other, and additional facts and more information emerge overtime. Many stories must be reported piecemeal, as they develop".

The journalist in Nigeria is accused of being inaccurate and unfair in his activities. The celebrated case of J. S. Waku, is a good example in this regard. Waku who as a Senator in the first tenureship of office of President Obasanjo from 1999 - 2003 granted an interview to the press in Jos, Plateau state in which he felt a military government was better than the democratic government of Obasanjo. The press, instead of honestly and fairly reporting this, overblew it by reporting that the Senator called for the military to take over power in Nigeria. Waku became a subject of attack in the whole country.

Sectionalism or Diversity: This appears to be a silent issue, which exists in the press in our country. Acknowledging this fact, Black et al (1995: 13), write:

"News media codes of ethics and books on journalism ethics seldom mention issues related to diversity. It is clear, however, that diversity issues have an important place in any discussion of journalistic ethics".

Accordingly, they explain again that:

Diversity is about the make-up of news organisation and about who is making decisions. Diversity is about the way story ideas are developed and who does the reporting. Diversity is about inclusiveness in choosing sources and about giving voice to the voiceless.

Diversity is very prevalent in the press circle in Nigeria. The press in Nigeria has been diversified in its coverage of issues. It has been diversified along ethnic, religious, sexual, political and economic lines. This explains why we can never have a unified press in this country. Can the media in the South report some issues that concern the North accurately and fairly? Still, can the northern established media ever cover and report accurately and fairly some of the issues affecting the South? Analysts will continue, in this regard, to sound one Nigeria with many voices.

Integrity

Many journalists in this country have sold their integrity and that of the profession to their selfish gains. The way they dress and go out, the way they behave when they are out, the way they simply go about in search of information is nothing to write home about. We have severally witnessed situations where journalists fight over speeches of people delivered at occasions they go to cover. Some fight over brown envelopes meant for them at occasions they are invited. By so doing, they belittle themselves and their profession before others. No wonder often one hears members of the fourth estate of the realm being addressed derogatorily as "press boys".

Deception

Deception, simply means the use of dishonest means by the journalists in gathering information. Although one is not aware of any celebrated case of deception among the journalists in Nigeria. In America such cases abound. One of such cases was that of a Freelance reporter, Jonathan Franklin who posed as mortician and entered the mortuary at Dover Air Force Base, the sole Desert Storm casualty processing center, during the Persian Gulf War and discovered that the military had been underestimating the number of casualties. Another case has been that of a veteran reporter with the Washington. Post in 1971, Ben H. Bagdikian who assumed a force identity and, got into the Washington Prison and came out with a report about the situation of inmates titled: "The Shame of the Prisons. Often security personnel in Nigeria especially the police appear to have problem with the press for using deception on them in order to gather news. Sambe and Ikoni (2004: 201-202), identify deceptive strategies used by journalists as impersonation, hidden cameras and false identities as well as taping and eavesdropping.

Recommendations

As difficult as it is determining what is ethical journalistically the following recommendations are important:

- * **Possession of Common Sense:** The journalist should have common sense. This will teach him what he should do and what he should not in order not to profane his name and that of his profession. He needs to be sagacious in ethical issues so as to win the affection and confidence of the Nigerian populace. This needs to be so for the sake of the survival, unity and development of this country.
- * **Admission of Credible People:** The press, in order to live up to expectation, in this regard, should admit only people with clean hands; people who are really committed to the good image of themselves and the profession; people who are really committed not only to the survival and unity, of the country but also its development politically, socially and economically.
- * **Monitoring the Practices of Media:** The Nigerian Union of Journalists should, in this regard, be effective in monitoring the practices of the media in the country to ensure that professional standard is not tampered with.
- * **Non-expectation of Material Reward:** Efforts aimed at combating unethical habits in the journalistic practice can be futile. It can only be achieved where the Nigerian journalist does not expect reward for his activities to be realized here on earth but like what is being said of a teacher, "in heaven".
- * **Consciousness about Ethics:** Of course, being conscious of the ethics of the profession can be of much benefit as it can be a holy book to him; a book that can teach him what is good and evil.

Conclusion

Issues concerning ethics in the journalistic world can never stop occurring. They can continue to present themselves in different forms to the journalists wherever he is. This paper has only succeeded in opening our eyes towards some of the most obvious ethical issues in the press in Nigeria. This underscores the fact that there are myriad ethical issues, which the paper fails to address. This is due to the diverse nature of the area of ethics.

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