

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF THE PRESS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In spite of the constitutional provision of "freedom of the press" Nigerian journalists have perennially suffered untold hardship in their bid to watch over the affairs of the society, This problem is rather compounded by all-pervasive nature of the activities of the press, coupled with the glamour attached to being at the centre of events. All these culminated in a systematic invasion of the journalism profession by quacks. Such infiltration has not only constituted a clog in the wheel of journalism practice .in the country, but has created an erroneous impression that journalism is an allcomers' profession. This paper sets out therefore to critically examine the problems militating against the press in Nigeria. It argues that journalism is not in any way an all-comers' profession; makes a case for professionalism as a driving force, for journalism excellence and concludes with recommendations.

Preamble

Nigerian pressmen have continually been harassed and harangued even with the country's return to civil rule and the constitutional provision of "freedom of the press". One may then ask what is this press freedom all about, and to what extent is it practiced in Nigeria? Article 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states "*The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people*". By this quoted section of the constitution, the press thus became constitutionally empowered to oversee the affairs of government and to report its activities to the people so that citizens are aware of government programmes and plans for them and invariably make them contribute their own quota to governance,

From their own point of view, Ezeukwu and Nwanze (1998; 39) see "freedom of the press" as nothing other than the unfettered right of everyone to write and publish what he pleases within the limits of the law. From this definition it can be deduced that freedom of the press is not absolute but a qualified one which demands responsibility on the side of pressmen. Here the clause "within the limits of the law" connotes responsibility. It means that the press has a responsibility/obligation towards the survival and preservation of various aspects of the society. Responsibility implies that every right to freedom of expression and write-up has a price:.... and that price is fulfillment of the expectations of the society. What it means is that the press should fearlessly and objectively carry out its responsibility of informing, educating and entertaining to public satisfaction.

But unfortunately, some media men have allowed their ego to interfere with this responsibility attachment on press freedom, hence the disagreement between government and its agencies on one hand and the press on the other hand. Given that the press has shirked its responsibility of the society, government is then left with no other option than to enforce such responsibility on the press through nuzzling and persuasion. So it could be rightly said that some of the problems associated with press freedom have their roots in the responsibility clause. To end, one can unequivocally submit that to a reasonable extent, the Nigerian press has never been free to perform its functions. In addition to this constitutional barrier, hereunder are other factors militating against press freedom in Nigeria.

Obnoxious Laws: The problem obnoxious laws dates back to 1673, when the British government declared that all printers-be they of books or newspapers must obtain a license to operate (Ogunsiji, 1989:2), Here in Nigeria, certain laws have been made by governments restricting the circulation of certain newspapers in certain parts of the country, like that which was imposed by the civilian government of (the First Republic in its dying days. Another example is the notorious Decree Number Four (4) promulgated by the Buhari administration which sought to prevent the press from criticizing some government functionaries.

Secrecy: Nigerian government, nay other government the world over consider some information very sensitive that they deny the press access to such information. For example, the Nigerian government security regulations is so shrouded in secrecy that it is impossible for even the most cooperative official to divulge security information to the press. Nigeria pressmen are equally not allowed access to information on areas like foreign policy, defence, trade secrets etc. whose disclosure the government considers injurious (o international relations).

Censorship: It is a proven fact that the pen is mightier than the sword. It is equally true that some people have wrongly used the pen to frustrate, ridicule and sometimes eulogize fellow countrymen, organizations and governments. To tame this tide, government then introduced censorship-system of examining press materials beforehand in order to guard against publication of seditious, libelous, and obscene materials. Such advance screening of materials runs foul of the ethics of the profession and negates the principle of press freedom.

Media Ownership and Control: Ownership of most broadcast media outfits and some newspaper organizations are in the hands of government. Under Ibis-arrangement, the press is then reduced to mere megaphone of government for he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Government also control the press through imposition of cut-throat registration fees since every medium (print or broadcast) must obtain license from government before it gets into operation. Given that the bulk of media contents revolve around programmes and policies of government, it therefore controls the media by deciding which information to make available to it and which ones to conceal as in the case of defence information etc. earlier mentioned. Such practices do not allow for free flow of qualitative information and as such constitute impediments to freedom of the press.

Harassment: On many occasions, Nigerian pressmen have been tortured, arrested, detained and often arraigned before courts by law enforcement agents on trumped-up allegations. Tayo Awoiusin of (he Champion newspapers and Chris Anyanwu, publisher of the TSP magazine are cases in point.

In addition to the above stated challenges of the Nigerian press is the issue of infiltration of the profession by quacks. Research findings show that the persuasive power of the press and the glamour of being at the centre of events have compelled individuals and government to be interested in the activities of the press, hence it is common place in Nigeria to see people who are not trained in the art of journalism go into the establishment of media outfits- newspapers/ magazines houses; and radio/ television stations and schools of mass communication. These quacks who lack the special training, expertise and technical skills necessary for the-occupation, boldly parade themselves as pressmen thereby creating an erroneous impression that journalism is an all-comers' profession.

To a reasonable extent, this systematic invasion can be attributed to the nature of the profession -(its activities cut across all spheres of human endeavour and all branches of knowledge in addition to its multidisciplinary nature) which made every Dick, Tom and Harry to lay claim to membership of the profession. Admittedly, the press in Nigeria may be suffering deficiencies of professionalism which include what should be the basic training? What should be the standard of knowledge? What should be the qualification of members? What should be the apprenticeship and membership requirements for the professional journalism? Here, the author's submission is (hat journalism is not and will never be an all-comers' profession. There are physical, mental and character qualities to be acquired by the real professionals in the course of their journalistic training.

By physical value or quality, we mean that the journalist requires to be a man/woman of strong physique, for journalism is not and has never been a profession for delicates in health or physical weakling. In other words, the profession makes critical demand on stamina which only those who are physically fit can cope with. There is also this complex nature of the job which is compounded by irregular work hours, uncertainty of meal times, spells of intense concentration, lots of travels to and fro; and the unexpected moments which lend themselves for exploration and exploitation.

On the issue of mental quality, Nwanze (1991:5) states thus:

A journalist must be a person of higher than an average intelligence, a thorough education, sound training and discipline. He must be sharp-witted. At least a diploma in journalism should be the basic entry point into the profession. He must have "nose for news", a discriminator' (skeptical) mind and a taste of all aspects of learning- classics, Immunities, science(s). technology and current affairs. Knowledge of typing and shorthand is required of him.

Qualities of character, temperament and personality are highly needed in the exerting profession of journalism. So a journalist should be a social soul, good mixer, goal getter, motivator and rallying point. He should be intellectually democratic and not the solitary or self-opinionated type. A journalist must be a man of the people who shares in their interests. It means he must be a patient listener, tolerant, adaptable always friendly.

At this juncture, the author hereby makes a case for professionalism as an antidote to some of the problems militating against the practice of journalism in Nigeria. The New Webster's Dictionary of English number of occupations or vocations involving special learning and carrying a certain social prestige". On that note, professionalism can be taken to mean the process of acquired skills or qualities necessary for growth in the profession which must include among other things a mastery and application of the ethics of that profession.

Ezeukwu and Nwanze (1998:84) said that professionalism refers to the ideology and related activities which epitomize a value or belief system acceptable to some occupational groups. They further argued that the ideology of 'professionalism' conditions the professional attributes of an occupation by providing the practitioners with a noble picture of the occupational world both as it is and as it should be; and in so doing the practitioners organize or professionalize their complex world into an area requiring special training, advanced knowledge, expertise, technical skills and restricted entry into the occupation. They contend that "professionalism is a psychological set, that is a world view and an aspiration backed up with specialized activities relating to occupation.

Molokwu and Aguomba (1990:313-314) posit that professionalism in journalism implies understanding of "what standards are expected of them, not only by their colleagues and employers, but by the society at large." To them, the following are the very pillars upon which professionalism stands:

1. Recognition of the sacredness of truth and freedom,
2. Avoidance of libel, sedition, deliberate distortion, bad taste and salaciousness,
3. Displaying the spirit of retracting facts when wrong,
4. Balanced reporting and presenting both sides of the coin,
5. Burying personal biases or sectional interests,
6. Respect for social norms and laws of the land,
7. Keeping clear of corrupt practices,
8. Protecting your source of information at all cost,
9. Sporting a good personality (this embodies neatness and the rule here is don't overdress, don't be too flashy and don't be churlish.

In his own view, Nwosu (1992) defines professionalism as "a planned, systematic academic training and acquisition of skill in a particular profession discharging the functions of that profession with a sense of responsibility and honour; and being guided by the code of ethics of that profession." He contends that professionalism should be seen as esoteric, sacred and with a defined parameter of membership. In this case, professionalism refers to the translation of the theoretical aspects of what has been learnt in the classroom into practical on-the-job terms, it implies stiffness of fibre and toughness of backbone needed by professionals to glide through the desert of pebbles of the job.

To cap it all, professionalism in journalism connotes the acquisition of physical, mental and character values they will make for smooth, expert and enviable discharge of journalistic responsibilities.

Conclusion

With the above scholarly postulations on professionalism and the attendant implications, it has become crystal clear that just as a roadside drug vendor cannot be seen as a pharmacist nor a litigant be seen as a lawyer, so also must anybody not trained in the art of journalism be seen, addressed or even parade himself/herself as a pressman.

Recommendations

Having come this far, one may then be compelled to ask "how can we improve upon journalism practice in Nigeria now that we have been able to identify our problems?"

1. Restriction of entry into the profession. This can be achieved through setting a standard of academic training, apprenticeship and qualifications for membership, it involves stipulations of admission requirements for candidates wishing to study mass communication, ensuring that only duly accredited schools undertake communication studies, widening of mass communication's curriculum to include shorthand and computer education in addition to recruitment of quality lecturers who must possess first and second degrees which must be obtained from recognized

- institutions.
2. There is urgent need for the establishment of an independent and effective regulatory body (The Nigeria Press Council) to regulate the activities of the press. The type of press council being advocated here is such that government should not meddle with its composition, forming of quorum and the rest of the contentions issues that paralyzed the Nigerian Press Council Decree of 1978.
 3. The hazardous nature of the profession calls for establishment of insurance scheme aimed at protecting and possibly compensating its members from risks arising from their beats. Morale boosting packages of monetary and material values like, the "member of the order of the pen", (MOP), Media Merit Award (MMA) etc should be stepped up and sustained in

order to encourage hard working and dedicated press men. In addition, improve me ill in the conditions of service of pressmen through the provision of latest technological devices that enhance performance, increment in pay packages and other incentives of journalists will undoubtedly improve on journalism practice in the country.

4. A National Institute of Communication established by law should be set up to undertake the task of providing one year professional training to graduates of mass communication before such candidates are deemed qualified to practice, just like their law counterparts. On the other hand, this paper hereby recommends a compulsory one-year media attachment at the end of the candidates' second year in school. Such attachment should be honestly supervised to avoid evasion by students.
5. With the country's return to democratic governance, the legislative arm of government at all levels should preoccupy themselves with making laws that will give pressmen free access to information like the information bill act. The media on its side should endeavour to open and maintain register of all qualified progressions for proper documentation and easy identification.
6. The regulatory body (Nigerian Press Council) should closely monitor government with a view to ensuring that only people with journalism background are given licenses to float media outfits (print or broadcast) as the case may be. This measure will in no small way promote professional excellence, since such persons are conversant with the ethics of the profession.
7. It is the humble recommendation of his author that appointments to media-related positions such as minister/ commissioner for information, special advisers/ assistants on media and publicity, chief press secretaries, public relations/information officers etc be exclusively reserved for graduates of mass communication, while efforts should be made to Hush out all imposters from the profession.

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