

NIGERIAN JOURNALISM AND PROFESSIONALISM: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Journalism, like other professions, has direct impact on the citizenry and the society at large. Practitioners are expected to be guided by a code of conduct which members are expected to comply with strictly, and to be enforced by a body acceptable to all the stakeholders. However, journalism practice in Nigeria has raised a lot of questions as to the propriety of referring to it as a profession. The loose definition of the criteria for membership has made the profession an all-comers-affair. Also, the absence of a prescribed qualifying test has made it difficult to moderate the standard of journalism practice in Nigeria. To restore credibility to the profession, the gap between school curricula and journalism practice must be bridged. A revisit to the existing code of conduct to explicitly state those who can practice journalism in Nigeria is necessary. Also, an acceptable remuneration package comparable with other professions must be worked out.

Key words: journalism, professionalism, new media, professional norms

Introduction

Journalism is increasingly becoming a difficult concept to define and delineate because of some contemporary developments having direct effects on its practice. The twenty - first century invention of the new media, especially the internet, has revolutionized and redefined the scope and practice of journalism all over the world. The emergence of the concept of ‘Citizen Journalism’ has compounded the problems of; first who is a journalist, second, what is journalism, third, what are the ethical requirements for the practice of journalism, fourth, what are the roles expectation of journalists and journalism profession in the society, as well as many other questions begging for attention and answers.

However, regardless of the seemingly nebulous outlook of journalism in the contemporary time, journalism is concerned with the gathering, processing and dissemination of information regarded as important and critical to the operations of the different components of the society.

According to Microsoft Encarta (2009), journalism refers to the process of “gathering, evaluating and distributing facts of current interest”. The professional norms of good journalism include, in particular, the following; truthfulness, objectivity, neutrality and detachment (kempf, 2007). The crisis of confidence that rocked journalism in the 19th Century gave birth to the development in the twentieth century, the concept of social responsibility theory which ascribed to the press some responsibilities in addition to the professional requirements and responsibilities of the profession.

Theoretical Foundation

The work is anchored on two communication theories: the Social Responsibility Theory and the Development Media Theory.

i. Social Responsibility Theory

As a result of the shortcomings of the libertarian theory of the press, the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press set up in the United States of America in 1947 recommended that, apart from ensuring and preserving press freedom, the press is also expected to observe certain social standards and responsibilities in performing their professional functions. Thus, the emergence of social responsibility theory, according to Siebert et al (1956) as cited by Folarin (1998:28) was premised on six functions.

- i. To serve the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible.
- ii. To inform the public to enable it to take self determined action.
- iii. To protect the rights of the individual by acting as watchdog over the government.
- iv. To serve the economic system, for instance the bringing together buyers and sellers through the medium of advertising.
- v. To provide good entertainment, whatever “good” may mean in the culture at any point in time.
- vi. To preserve financial autonomy in order not to become dependent on special interests and influences.

ii. **Development Media Theory**

The theory seeks to prescribe the function of the press in developing nations of the world. The theory posits that the media/press must provide such platforms that can accelerate the development of their respective nations. The major thrusts of the theory according to McQuail (1987) as cited by Folarin (1998) are that:

- i. Media must accept and carry out positive development tasks in line with nationally established policy.
- ii. Freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society.
- iii. Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language(s).
- iv. Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries which are close geographically, culturally or politically.
- v. Journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedoms in their information gathering and dissemination tasks.
- vi. In the interest of development ends the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict, media operation, devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified.

Thus, the above two theories present the media institution as central and germane to the existence of the society. And, for the media institution to perform its social responsibility and developmental functions, it must be peopled by professionals who understand and can uphold the central media tenets such as impartiality, truthfulness, balanced reporting, fairness to all parties, etc. It is only through this that the media institution/journalism can live up to the expectations of a profession.

Historical Development of the Nigerian Press

The Nigerian Press predates the Nigerian nation with more than a hundred years. Whereas, the Nigerian nation came into existence in 1960, the year Nigeria obtained independence; what metamorphosed into the Nigerian Press started in 1859. History has it that, the first newspaper to be established in Nigeria, Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba; hit the newsstands on December 3, 1859.

Although, presses for the production of religious pamphlets, tracks, posters, etc, had been established in Calabar in 1846 and in Abeokuta in 1854 by the Presbyterian Church and the Christian Mission Society (CMS) respectively, newspapering did not begin until 1859 when what could be regarded as the first newspaper to be published in Nigeria was published.

Although, the establishment of Iwe Iroyin by the Missionaries, according to Coker (1968), while citing one of the letters of Rev. Henry Townsend to London; was “to get the people to read..... to beget the habit of seeking information by reading”; it is imperative to state that, the immense role of journalism as well as the realization of the potentials of journalism as a potent instrument in accomplishing their mission works, especially the successes journalism recorded in other British Colonies in mobilizing the people to support their programmes and accomplishing their goals, precipitated the establishment of the first and subsequent newspapers in Nigeria in the late 1850s and early 1860s.

Thus, the desire of the British Missionaries as well as the British humanitarian movements, at the time to succeed in their operations in Nigeria and other parts of Africa led to the establishment of newspapers in their Colonies across Africa. According to Omu (1978:6):

The prevailing situation evidently made a strong impression on British Missionaries going to Africa and the emphasis which the humanitarians placed upon pamphlets and newspaper publicity and propaganda elevated the printing press into an important engine of missionary enterprise. It is not surprising therefore, that printing press proliferated in West Africa during the first half of the nineteenth century.

However, it must be stated that the mission of the newspaper, according to Ekpu (1996):

... was to evangelize the natives through Western education and to champion the issues that affected

them such as the abolition of slave trade and the improvement of the welfare of the Egbas.

Journalism as a Profession

A profession, according to the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, refers to "a type of job that needs special training or skill, especially one that needs a high level of education". A profession is conceptually referred to as that occupation that requires an extensive education or specialized training.

According to Odunewu (2000:3), a profession is "an occupation requiring advanced education and training, involving intellectual skills as in medicine, law, pharmacy, engineering, etcetera".

However, practitioners of these professions are referred to as professionals. Odunewu (2000) highlighted some of the criteria by which professionals are judged. Some of which include:

- ❖ Specialized educational preparation
- ❖ Dedication to public's welfare
- ❖ A distinct body of knowledge
- ❖ An enforceable code of conduct, that is, a shared body of values and standards, and
- ❖ Individual accountability

From the above, it could be deduced that, for Journalists to live up to their expectations in the society and to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills to perform those functions as prescribed by the constitution of the land, they must be properly "schooled" in the art and science of journalism. The process of detecting news, gathering news, sorting news, processing news and eventual dissemination of news require both education and technical skills. Also, it is instructive to point out that, Journalists (Press) do not operate or function in a vacuum; the society ascribes to them certain social responsibilities. Neophytes or novices cannot adequately fill the gap. Only those who are sufficiently trained and grounded in journalism or mass communication can perform these functions satisfactorily. Thus, journalism, like other disciplines such as law, medicine, engineering, etc could be described as a profession, especially when considering its impacts and role in the society.

Odunewu (2000:5) submits that journalism is a profession because journalists perform critical functions in the society such that any "journalist that wants to excel must adhere to certain standards of behaviour ...also... there are core values such as respect for truth, accuracy, independence, fairness, balance, which a journalist must uphold".

Journalism and Professionalism: The Nigeria Experience

It is pertinent to note that Nigerian Journalism took off much earlier than the proclamation or inauguration of the Nigerian nation. Evidently, Nigerian Journalism was not guided at inception by any law or regulations. Precisely, there was none in place to define the requirements, composition and operations of the players in the industry. Nigerian Journalism was dominated, at the beginning, by people drawn from several pools. According to Agbaje, "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, drop outs from other professions, etc"(Agbaje, 1992:42).

The above shows that the forerunners of the profession, apart from the fact that they lacked the basic educational prerequisites, 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. This perception continued, even, after independence in 1960. History has it that, at an interview section between students of the International Press Institute (IPI) in Lagos and the Director of the Institute, Tom Hopkins, during the opening ceremony of the centre by President Nnamidi Azikwe in 1964, a student told the Director that:

You are just trying to make us feel good about being
Journalists as though we had an important career before
us. Don't you realize that all of us here are the throw-outs
and outcasts from other jobs. (Barton, 1979:25).

Thus, obviously, 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-estimation among their colleagues in other professions.

Although, traditionally, even in the Western world, Journalists learned or acquired their skills through on-the-job-training, the method changed in the early 20th Century when the first school of Journalism in the United States was established at the University of Missouri in Columbia in 1908. And, a bequest from Joseph Pulitzer led to the creation of a graduate school of Journalism at Columbia University, New York City in 1912 (Castro, 2009).

History has it that, Journalism in the developed world started through “apprenticeship method” – a system of learning the skills of a craft or trade from experts in the field by working with them for a period of time. The on-the-job-training method continued unabated in most of the developed nations until the early 20th Century when formal Journalism Schools were established for the training of would-be Journalists.

Journalism Practice in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

Although, Nigerian Journalists most often lay claim to the observance of the professional tenets of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and the rest, it is however doubtful whether it could be said 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 members, a membership register, a code of conduct that would find its monitors, a disciplinary body that would enforce the code.

Evaluating the Nigerian Journalism practice, as presently constituted, with the above requirements, one would not but agree with the view expressed by Adaja (2011) that, “the Nigerian Media cannot be fully referred to as a profession”. Although, the Nigerian Union of Journalists parades a Code of Conduct in which in its Article I (i) referred to the Union as a professional body as well as a trade union (Nnameka et al, 1989:276). The Code, however, failed to state or identify the body of knowledge to be imbibed by its members. Again, the membership provision was so loose that anybody that has anything to do with media organization can call him/herself a Journalist. The provision provides for Public Relations Officers/Practitioners, those who are employed as editorial staff, those who had completed a probationary period of 12 months, etc to be called Journalists, without stating any minimum qualifications. Also, no acceptable body to all the stakeholders was created or established to regulate the practice of Journalism and enforce its rules and regulations in Nigeria as done in other advanced countries of the world. For example, in 1952, Britain established the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ). The body was charged with the task of securing minimum standards for journalism practitioners. The body, subsequently, introduced a qualifying examination, the proficiency test, as a measure of control and career advancement. According to Boyd – Barret (1980:323):

The purpose of the proficiency test was to indicate the completion of training during the apprenticeship period, and thus to qualify the holder of a proficiency certificate for advancement to the status of senior journalist and its associated salary advantages.

The National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) provides that candidates must have passed four basic subjects of English language, law, public administration and shorthand before admitting such candidates for the proficiency test. Although, emphasis was placed on apprenticeship; the on- the- job-training was designed to lead to some visible goals in form of passing an examination. At the same time, the apprenticeship was expected to last for 30 months, so as to regulate the practice of journalism in the land. This is very much unlike the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) provision of 12 months and without any qualifying examination (Nnaemeka, 1989).

Again, the practice of journalism in Nigeria has been characterized by flaws that had prevented it from being referred to as a profession. At inception, the Nigerian media space was occupied by practitioners who neither saw themselves as professionals nor made professionalism their watchword. The first newspaper in Nigeria, Iwe Iroyin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba, was established by Rev. Henry Townsend who never had the opportunity of attending a school of Journalism. He never belonged or subscribed to any known body of knowledge and never practiced journalism. The closest experience he had was that he “watched” his brother established a newspaper in one of the British Colonies before coming to Nigeria. Evidently, the foundation of journalism in Nigeria was erected on the wrong footing. And, if the foundation be destroyed, what can the righteous do (Ps. 11:3).

It is instructive to note that the Nigerian Journalists have been in perpetual fluid drifting from neutrality to partisan politics both in the period preceding independence and after. Before independence, Nigerian journalism landscape was polarized along ownership structure. Although, Nigerian journalists worked together to fight a common enemy, the colonial master, in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, the creation of the three regions brought about ownership/party loyalty and affiliation. Journalists and media organizations jettisoned their professional tenets of neutrality, objectivity, impartiality, etc, and took on the garb of partisan politics. Journalists shifted allegiance to their owners, regions as well as the dominant party or government of the region. Media organizations and Journalists became divided among the three major parties – the NPC, NCNC and AG. Journalists, thus, became politically – minded and politically – partisan to the extent that all the allusions to professional standards were consigned into the dustbin.

Again, the liberalization and commercialization 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 forms of news coverage to be evaluated from the commercial point of view. The impact of the policy became noticeable on journalists' sense of news judgment, 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, commercialization of broadcasting has contributed to the dead of serious journalism in Nigerian Broadcasting.

The commercialization phenomenon posed a lot of challenges to the credibility of the news stories reported by Journalists because stories of events are usually arranged to suit their sponsors. Usually, the stories “add nothing tangible to the quality of life of the people” and “there is nothing journalistically newsworthy about them” (Oso, 2012).

Furthermore, the issue of role conflict (that is dual roles) has seriously affected the output of the average Nigerian Journalist. The oscillation between the professional requirements of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, etc, and the societal norms and values, especially 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 worlds 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 members of the professional community nor members of the national – hegemonic community – but as moving constantly between them”.

Resolution

Nigerian Journalism today, is in deep crisis of credibility. As a result of individual, organizational, environmental and societal challenges, most of the cherished norms and values of the profession have been abused, violated and debased. A return to the traditional values of truthfulness, neutrality and impartiality may return the lost glory... According to Zandberg and Neiger (2005) citing a survey done among Israeli Journalists in 2003 by Tsfaty and Libio, (2003), “almost 90 percent of them (journalists) declared that verification of the truth is the most important value of the profession alongside the values of neutrality and of objectivity”.

To earn respect, recognition, and credibility for the Nigerian Journalism profession, truthfulness must be held sacred, while neutrality and objectivity should become sacrosanct. As a profession, the code of conduct should be revisited and reworked to state clearly the prerequisite qualifications necessary or required of a profession especially as it relates to the contemporary demands of the profession.

Although, there exist in Nigeria, today, a number of institutes, colleges/schools, polytechnics and universities offering Journalism or Mass Communication. These schools should do more than just teach journalism, and do critical analysis. According to Tabuwe and Tangjong (2010), “Journalism education should do more than teaching students how to write, it should teach them to think, to verify, to acclaim, to criticize and to synthesize”. Again, the gap between school curricula and journalism practice needs to be bridged. According to Chibita (2010) in a study in which people were asked the most critical gaps between Journalism Curricula and practice, “top on the list was investigative and analytical skills, language proficiency (particularly English), writing skills, computing skills, and lack of depth in cognate areas such as political science, economics, sociology and literature”.

It has become imperative to equip all upcoming journalists adequately for the contemporary challenges in the profession. Some key areas that will adequately equip upcoming journalists to become relevant locally and globally, according to Chibita (2010), include:

- i. providing a broad liberal arts base for journalism students.
- ii. Equip journalism students to work comfortably in local or regional as well as global languages.
- iii. Prioritize computer skills training.
- iv. Prepare students to engage in practical projects from an early stage to increase their employability.
- v. Consult with the industry and other stakeholders in developing and reviewing curricula.
- vi. Prepare students to develop contents for different platforms and to appeal to a wide range of audiences to make them more marketable upon graduation.

Above all, the issue of remuneration must be adequately addressed. Wages commensurate with other professions must be paid to journalists to boost their ego as professionals. The world is becoming highly competitive, and for any profession to remain afloat, such profession must create opportunity for career advancement and satisfaction. Thus, according to Adaja (2011:201), for Journalists to perform their “constitutional roles and self-imposed obligations; members of the profession (Journalists) must be adequately remunerated. An average journalist must ‘appear-well’ and ‘feed-well’ to ‘work-well’.

Conclusion

Considering the composition and practice of journalism in Nigeria today vis-à-vis other climes, one would agree that the profession needs regurgitation, for it to compete favourably with their colleagues in other lands and other professions. A standard code of conduct that will encompass the major thrust of the profession, membership requirements, recruitment procedures, mode of practice, and how to discipline erring members should be put in place. According to Adaja, “... a re-definition of the Nigerian media interest, mission and vision, unconditionally shared and subscribed to by all its members, must as a matter of urgency, be carried out”. Also, “conscious and conscientious efforts must be made to professionalize journalism in Nigeria by adhering to the basic tenets and characteristics required of a profession” (Adaja, 2011:200).

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