

# **Thoughts on Nigerian Media and Ethical Challenges by Shuaibu Usman Leman, National Secretary, Nigeria Union of Journalists at a workshop organized by Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the German Embassy in Nigeria in Abuja, September 30, 2014.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Journalism is very often being criticized and hardly enjoys public confidence as a result of what the journalists do or fail to do. As we all know, every profession is usually guarded and guided by certain laws, rules and regulations-whether formally coded or only recognized as conventions. The professional must therefore maintain some decorum and keep to certain standards of integrity to earn trust and command respect in the performance of his chosen career.

Media houses all over the world are subject to pressures by special interest groups. Among these are public relations people who are employed by special interest groups to help them look good, not only in the news but also in-between the news. No media house can ever be sure that none of its staff engages in the distortion or omission of the truth. For some, the trouble even starts from the top where the owners or their managers pass policies designed to help one group or so against another down the line.

## **Government\ Media Relationship**

It is difficult to understand the relationship between the government and the media, for the simple reason that while people in government will want to keep the operations of government strictly confidential, media professionals on the other hand will like to subject government operations to scrutiny in order to ensure that government remains accountable to the people. But in order to ensure effective delivery of services to the people by the government and to ensure that government on its part gets the needed support, in, for example the payment of taxes by the citizens, the media have to function as conduits of information to the people to urge them to perform their civic responsibilities to enable government deliver the desired services. The common objective of government and the media is therefore to provide effective services to the people. Certainly, while the government and the media are natural adversaries and cannot be institutional partners, yet they have to cooperate with each other to fight a common cause for the citizens, like fighting corruption etc. In doing so however, the media must not abandon its watchdog role.

## **Roles of the Media**

Section 22 of Chapter 11 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria confers on the Press, Radio, Television and other agencies of Mass Communication, the obligation to uphold at all times, the fundamental objectives contained in the Chapter, as well as uphold the responsibility of the Government to the people. Thus in Nigeria, the media should feel comfortable to emphasize that the Government has a duty to govern while the media has the duty to monitor the process of governance.

The roles of the media were farther captured succinctly by **Egbon (1999)** under the Social Responsibility Theory, as:

- 1- Serving the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs.
- 2- Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self government.
- 3- Safe guarding the rights of the individual by servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising.
- 4- Providing entertainment.
- 5- Maintaining its own financial self sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests.

So far, nothing new is being advocated for in this regard, rather it is the original and basic values of journalism that are being amplified- ethics, and respect for public interest and good journalistic conduct which require for instance that government policies are challenged and politicians taken to task when they propagate intolerance, xenophobia, religious bigotry, electoral fraud and other forms of corruption.

## **Condition of Nigerian Media**

The working conditions of journalists are in the most cases inadequate. Journalists working, as fulltime, and as freelancers, are overall poorly remunerated. They do not enjoy health and safety protection and rarely are covered by insurance. They are not even provided with the necessary equipment to help them protect themselves in conflicts or civilian unrests. Most media houses

are not financially stable or strong, and those who have the financial capacity to take safety measures do not want to invest in the safety of journalists and many are not properly trained.

Politicians, especially political contractors, in their desire to deliver political offices as might have been contracted to them, realize that to acquire power, either through legitimate means or through outright theft, they need to obtain the connivance of the media. And politicians and political office holders also know that to retain power, they require the support of the media, so also are those who wish to ascend to power. Even those whose positions are threatened suddenly realize the need to pocket the media. These explain the increasing number of politicians who set up media organizations solely to pursue such ambitions. These elements have compounded the problems of the media.

The press in Nigeria has suffered a number of setbacks over the years, with the obvious but unsuccessful attempts by government to control the media. There were equally increased harassment and killings of journalists in the country. These acts are equally causing frustrations among media professionals in the country. Politicians both in and out of government are increasingly filing legal cases against the media who especially report allegations of corruption, while security operatives have been used to block access for journalists in several areas.

On the one hand, a number of ostensibly independent media organizations are in fact owned by leading politicians or businessmen, thereby heightening concerns about the continued independence of the press, while poor professional standards and ethical violations continue to make the press vulnerable to government attacks.

### **Ethics and Journalism Practice**

The code of ethics for Nigerian Journalists starts off with a preamble that enjoins all who would participate in the profession of journalism to abide by the professional and ethical standards cast forth in 14 categories.

In summary, this deals with Editorial Independence, Accuracy and Fairness, Privacy, of Privilege/Non-Disclosure, Decency, Discrimination, Reward and Gratification; Violence; Children and Minors; Access to Information; Social Responsibility; Plagiarism and Copyright.

Under these categories, the code prescribes the right attitudes towards the practice of journalism. It clearly sketches what ought to be done and what should not be done, against the background of establishing good conduct and morals within the rank and file of those engaged in the

professional practice of journalism. In actual fact, it is very much in tune with the code of ethics of other international organizations.

If a journalist is amoral, then there will be no need talking about ethics.

This thought makes ethics a very important concern to the journalist who must imbibe some standards by which he can judge, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible and this, of course, indicates an attitude which embraces not only freedom but also personal responsibility in the same vein. Ethical consideration is very important as it compels the journalist to commitment and thoughtful decisions when faced with alternatives that could lead to the highest good of enhancing his credibility as a person and journalist.

### **Accountability in Media Practice**

In the constitutional sense, accountability is the quality of being accountable, answerable, bound to give explanation on an issue into which any one has been associated. What the constitution meant by this provision is that the press should be in a position to lubricate the act of government and the media should be given some protection to carry out this tasking role. This is logical because judges enjoy some protection through a provision which insulates judges from being sued for libel for whatever they say in their court. Likewise the parliament for whatever they say in the house.

Hence freedom of press in Nigeria should be made a right and not a privilege. In the same vein the media should give the people a run-down of government constitutional obligations to the people and make the leaders to be accountable. Unfortunately, the press has been found wanting in fulfilling this statutory obligation due to some challenges which these practitioners face in discharging their routine functions.

These challenges are now considered in line with quality conscience journalism.

### **Quality Conscience Journalism and Ethical Challenges**

A serious problem for the concept of quality conscience journalism is posed by the environment within which the practicing journalist operates. **Prince Tony Momoh** captures this bleak and frustrating atmosphere in his paper; *“Thought on Curricular Design for Media Laws, Ethics and Regulations”* thus: *“How can we as media practitioners operate in a polity where everyone breaks the rule, where the journalists are poorly paid or not paid at all, where record keeping is*

*so defective that people can pay their way out of crimes, where the officials who are supposed to give information hoard it; where there is total loyalty to the family and the ethnic group and ritual protection for their misdeeds; where those who should serve enslave the people through robbing the treasury?”.*

Okunna in her book titled ***Ethics of Mass Communication*** said that “*Nigerian society is filled with all sorts of ethical maladies that have defied all cures over the years*”. She attributes the major cause directly or indirectly to the all encompassing problem of materialism. She contends that “*Nigeria’s materialistic tendency has now redefined social morality and makes it the measure for determining the individual, irrespective of how the ill-gotten wealth may have come through glaring immoral sources* (Okunna 2003:81-82). Under this umbrella of materialism she itemized bribery and corruption, “kick back” ten percent, kola etc.

### **Corruption**

These days, many of the news media proprietors establish their media outfits to propagate themselves and boost their egos in accordance with what they intend to reap from the unsuspecting public. Be that as it may, the real problem comes in the way they treat their journalists. The pay is poor, there is no gain saying that, but even some of these journalists are owed the meager salaries and allowances for up to several months.

Besides, some do not even have a fixed amount of salary they are entitled to at the end of the month. They are contracted and sent to many bureaus in each state to file in stories to their headquarters. This practice leads to some of the journalists sitting in their rooms to coin and concoct nonexistent stories to be filed to their editors at the headquarters. You would agree that by such practice ethics is thrown to the winds. What now is the justification for the injunction of the code of ethics, which orders the journalists to respect **ACCURACY** and **FAIRNESS** in reporting? It will not be out of place to say that poverty is the major reason for many other vices by journalists. It forces them to negotiate and doctor facts in order to keep body and soul together ultimately producing many journalists without a conscience.

### **Editorial Interference**

Proprietors and some government officials create stories around themselves to look good in the eyes of the public and the media simply publish the surrogate information. It is proven that there

are newspapers whose editorial columns may be bought and delivered to special interests. According to **Garba Shehu**, one time President of the Nigerian Guild of Editors, in a paper titled ***Corruption in the Media***, two newspapers operating from the same city published an editorial on the same issue within 24 hours of each other. The issue was the survival of a government agency whose continued existence was at stake”.

The ethical question raised was how two newspapers could run editorials endorsing not only the same position but having the incredible coincidence of identity of opinion and in a few places phrasing and words. Could those editorials have been *canned*? Where is the place of **EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE**?

### **Recommendations**

We cannot forever keep talking about the ills and unethical practice of journalism without charting a way forward to lead us out of this unethical jungle.

After lambasting the shoddy way many journalists handle this noble fraternity of the pen , in a workshop in 2000, a veteran journalist, **Chief Ray Ekpo**, the then Chief Executive of the ***Newswatch Magazine*** and then President of the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) asked a seemingly simple question but a very important and all-encompassing question. “*What can we do about improving our practice, about regulating it so that we can earn respect as professionals*”?

In answering this question, every journalist who comes into this business should do so armed with a morale ethical shield, source of this basic belief or view is from home, school, and religious authority.

It is very important for a journalist to know that these moral and ethical belief systems will come under attack more from persuaders (interest groups). The journalist must come to terms with what he or she can do and what he or she cannot do for interest groups. He or she must watch for these pressures, from family members, as the persuader may even be a friend privately offering gratification, advice, praise and rewards. Such onslaughts will greatly chip away at the ethical sensitivities by explaining why they are permissible.

Each media house must define its mission and pursue it with visionary zeal. It must at all times seek to stand by such principles and rigorously enforce them on their staff. On the other hand, media houses must fulfill their obligations to employees by paying reasonably competitive wages

as and when due. By so doing, the respective media organizations will find it easier to enforce discipline and the prescribed standards.

But nothing is perhaps more important than a good pay to keep the journalists on the ethical path. One time president of the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria , **Late Chief M.K.O. Abiola** used to say all the time that *“if you do not pay your journalists well, someone else will pay them and they will work for him*

### **Conclusion**

Journalism is like no other job, and must be guarded jealously. What journalists write and how they write it inevitably touch on the lives of other people. Careless or deliberate or mischievous publications can ruin many lives and properties as had been witnessed in our present day journalism. It is imperative therefore if ethical considerations are given the required pride of place in the profession.

### **AKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

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