

Media Accountability Systems and Journalism Practice in Nigeria

ONAYINKA TOYIN SEGUN, PhD

Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria, P.M.B. 704, Akure, NIGERIA

Abstract

The paper appraises the existing media accountability structures in Nigeria and their appositeness on the ethical expectations from journalists by the society. The paper employs social responsibility theory to linchpin the thesis of the paper. The paper submits that the existing structures may not be able to support the fragile nature of our fledgling democracy. It therefore recommends the strengthening of the existing structures through self regulation, minimal government interference with more roles for the civil societies.

Keywords: Media, accountability systems, Journalism Practice, ethics

Introduction

The media symbolize the bastion for the common man; they support and promote the sustainability of societal values and infrastructures. The roles and contributions of the media to the development of the society are manifold. One of the obvious testimonies of the Nigerian media in the last decade is their contributions towards the restoration of democracy. However, after the simmering down of the euphoria that accompanied the restoration of democracy in Nigeria, there is need for us to shift our attention to a very crucial area, that is, who and what watch the watchdog, or better still, how does the journalist satisfy the ethical requirements of the profession? The reason for the question is not farfetched, the roles and position of the journalist in the society imposes high moral obligations on the journalist so such that the consumer of the Nigerian media can have a sustainable trust in the media. The sensitive position of the journalist and the ethical and moral obligations surrounding the profession were brought to the fore by Akinfeleye (2003:12) when he asserts that:

A nation that is socially responsible both in concept, structure, ideology and governance, its press would tend to be responsible in their practice of the profession of journalism. But on the other hand, a nation that is socially irresponsible, its journalists would be contaminated with irresponsible instincts and thus would practice irresponsible journalism, sensationalism, falsehood, bias, outright lies, propaganda journalism and unethical practices, which if not quickly checked, may lead the Fourth Estate of the Realm to metamorphose into the Fourth Estate of the Wreck.

Also, Akinfeleye (2003:13) quoting Kampelman notes that "... an uncontrolled, (Sensationalism), or unrestrained power of the press may spell doom for democracy." It is obvious therefore that while the journalist plays enormous roles in promoting the societal values, growth and development, there is need to develop sustainable approach towards ensuring that the power of the journalist is not abused leading to the destruction of the society it ought to build.

Therefore, the issue of moral and ethical considerations in the media cannot be regarded lightly. Journalism, as a profession, is based on trust, a trust that has no underlining and enforceable contract. It therefore appeals mainly to the practitioners' ability to adhere to, embrace and pursue moral and ethical values in the profession of journalism.

Purpose of the Paper

The paper appraises the existing media accountability structures in Nigeria that tend to impose ethical considerations on the practice of journalism on the one hand and its implication(s) on the expected social responsibility of the journalist on the other hand. The paper submits that the existing structures may not be able to support the fragile nature of our fledgling democracy and its institutions. It therefore suggests the strengthening of the existing structures through self regulation in order to have a viable media that appreciate and understand their place in the society with journalists practicing their profession guided by sound ethical and moral values.

Theoretical Framework

It is an acceptable dictum that four theories guide the way we understand the workings of the press, but the most relevant of the four theories to this paper is the social responsibility theory of the press (Siebert et al, 1972:52). The social responsibility theory therefore serves as the anchor of the paper.

The basic assumption of the theory is that "... the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates" ... it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted." ... "an understanding of these aspects of society is basic to

any systematic understanding of the press.” In explaining the philosophical and political foundations or typologies of the world press systems, Siebert et al. argued that in actual sense, there are only two basic theories of the press - which are: (1) Authoritarian Theory of the Press and (2) Libertarian Theory of the Press. The other two - i.e. the Soviet Totalitarian or the Communist theory and the Social Responsibility theory are just "modifications" of the authoritarian and libertarian theories respectively.

The social responsibility theory of the press came into being as a result of pluralism in media ownership and content which created uneasiness on the part of the public according to Siebert et al. The power of media owners then was much that "... they (the press) determined which persons, which facts, which opinion, which voice, which version of the story shall reach the public." Consequently, a commission on Freedom of the Press was established to proffer solution to the irresponsible activities of the press. In their report, the Commission asserted that "... protection against government is not now enough to guarantee that a man who has something to say shall have a chance to say it". The commission states that:

... the power and near-monopoly position of the media impose on them an obligation to be socially responsible, to see that All sides are fairly presented and that the public has enough information to decide and that if the media do not take on themselves such responsibility, it may be necessary for some other agencies of the realm (i.e. the Court) to enforce it." (Levy 1966 & Akinfeleye, 2003:15).

The above strengthens the thesis of this paper and allows it to posit that the journalist under the umbrella of press freedom may 'run riot' and undermine the very existence of the society it ought to support especially when we agree with the earlier submission that the journalist does not operate in isolation of the environment s/he finds himself. Therefore, in a fragile democracy like Nigeria's, the search for the right balance between press freedom and ethical consideration in the practice of journalism becomes imperative. Therefore, the general and obvious questions are what manner of ethical environment does the journalist operate? What is the environmentally imposed ethical flagship set by the society for the journalist in h/her practice? Or who determines the boundary between ethical considerations and press freedom in such a way that the journalist is not lost in the abyss of imposed or self imposed regulation?

The preceding questions bring us to the examination of existing media accountability systems that tend to set the tone and impose ethical environment for the journalist in the practice of his/her profession.

The Nigerian Media Accountability Structures The Government – The Nigerian Press Council

It can be safely argued that the Nigerian Press has been subjected to one form of influence or regulation right from when Africa's oldest vernacular newspaper "Iwe Irohin Yoruba" was founded in Abeokuta, Ogun State of Nigeria, by a British missionary, Rev. Henry Townsend in 1859. The regulations are to ensure that the Press operates within the best practices possible. However, the positive or negative manifestations of such influence or regulation are usually objects of debates. Nonetheless, an examination of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999:45) and the fundamental objectives and directive principles of the state policy- clearly identifies the role of the media as follows:"The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in chapter two and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people".

Clearly, the constitution has clearly drawn the boundary of operation for the media. The media are marked out as the watchdog of governance. However, the Nigerian press under the military did not have a palatable story to tell when it comes to regulation. Some journalists were detained for long period under the State Security - Detention of Persons - Decree No. 2, 1984; Article 19; Treason and other offences - (Special Military Tribunal) Decree No. 1 of 1986. And indeed, many journalists were detained. (Akinfeleye, 2003) to mention a few.

With the restoration of democracy, the Nigerian Press Council Act was passed in (1992:35). The Act specifically provides for the repeal of the Nigerian Media Council Act of 1988 and establishes the Nigerian press Council:

to promote high professional standards for the Nigerian Press and deal with complaints emanating from members of the public about the conduct of journalists in their professional capacity or complaints emanating from the press about the conduct of persons or organizations towards the press and for other matters connected therewith.

It is curious to note that the President of the country appoints the chairman of the Council while the Minister for information appoints other members. The Council is a Parastatal under the Ministry of Information. The functions of the Council include: enquiring into complaints about the conduct of the council; monitoring the activities of the press with a view to ensuring compliance with the code of professional and ethical conduct of

the Nigerian Union of Journalists; receiving application from and documenting the print media and monitoring their performance to ensure that owners and publishers comply with the terms of their mission statement and objectives in liaison with Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria. Section 9 of the Act provides for code of professional and ethical conduct to guide the press and journalist in the performance of their duties (Nigerian Press Council Act, 1992).

The establishment of the Nigerian Press Council poses a moral question; the constitution has clearly set out the roles of the government and the press. While it is the duty of the government to provide good governance and be socially responsible to the people, the Press is expected to monitor the government, that is, serve as the watchdog. However, with the Nigerian Press Council, the government will now have one control or the other over the watchdog.

It is not surprising therefore, when the Nigerian High Court in its judgment, as reported by the Vanguard Newspaper of 29th July, 2010 declared that the Nigerian Press Council Act violates the rights of free speech. The court considers the general scheme of the Nigerian Press Council Act, the objective for which it is established, its legal and institutional framework, and the mischief it is intended to cure; whether law in its legislative scheme has the effect of abridging the right of the plaintiffs and if so, whether such abridgement is within the derogatory provision of Section 45 of the Constitution.

The Journalists- Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists

Realising its sensitive role as the fourth estate of the realm, the journalists came together to have for themselves what they refer to as the code of ethics for Nigerian Journalists. Accordingly, the body states that: "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 a healthy regard for the public interest." The 15 code items addressed ethical issues involving: Editorial independence, Accuracy and Fairness, Privacy, Privilege/Non Disclosure, Decency, Discrimination, Reward and Gratification, Violence, Children and Minors, Access to Information, Public Interest, Social Responsibility, Plagiarism, Copyright, Press Freedom and Responsibility. The code of ethics of Nigeria Journalists is part of the mandate of the Nigerian press council to enforce, thus putting paid to its objectivity.

The Media Owner- The Office of the Ombudsman

The office of the Ombudsman was established by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association of Nigeria (NPAN) to help to deliver satisfactory, speeding and accessible remedies to many of the complaints at a relatively low cost as its response to the growing complaints by members of the public of ethical infractions by journalists. The NPAN is explicit on the objectives of the Ombudsman: To provide the public with an independent forum for resolving complaints about the press; to resolve all complaints quickly, fairly and free of charge; to maintain high standards of Nigerian journalism and journalistic ethics; and to defend the freedom of the press and the freedom of the public to be informed. (Best Forum, 2009).

The establishment of the office of the Ombudsman provides a good platform for the address of ethical issues but fell short in the area of funding, inclusion of the civil societies and inability to address the issue of relationship with the Nigerian Press Council most especially when NPAN is represented on the Board of the Nigerian Press Council.

The justification for the rejection of the aforementioned regulatory systems, particularly the Nigerian Press council can be understood against the backdrop of the fact that in developed nations, the establishment of press Council is basically a private affair, free from government machineries. It is made up of the three major actors of social communication: the people who own the power to inform, those who possess the talent to inform and those who have the right to be informed. Representatives of civil society play significant roles in the operation of the Press Council. This actually provides significant benefits: it gives the body greater credibility, it secures its transparency and accountability, it provides an independent and unbiased viewpoint, and civil society representatives serve as the voice of media consumers. The features of press Council in developed nations are obviously lacking in the Nigerian Press Council, therefore, it is difficult for it to divorce itself from government interference or bias.

Following the highlighting of the pitfalls of the existing media accountability structures in Nigeria, it is necessary to propose a model that would enhance the effective realization of the social responsibility of the Nigerian journalists within a workable accountability system.

Need for Paradigm Shift? Self Regulation to the Rescue

Self regulation provides a platform for the Nigerian media to reinvent themselves. It imposes moral and ethical obligations on the Nigerian media practitioners, including media owners in fulfilling the traditional and primary roles of the media in protecting democracy and societal values. Self regulation divorces the media from any kind of order or control by the apparatus and organs of government. It entails that the media identifies and imposes on

itself self regulatory principles that will enable it successfully meet the expectations of the citizens. According to Zlatev (2011:75) “Self-regulation is also important for media as it has the power to generate change: of mentality, behaviour, policy, life. If the media want to be a driver of change, they should be responsible enough to change and develop constantly.”

Zlatev, in highlighting the various standpoints on self regulation, posits that attitude to and perception of self regulation is culture and continent dependent. He therefore identifies three core points as convergence of self regulation of the media in free societies. The first viewpoint is that self regulation serves to protect the media from political censorship, economic dependence and devastating court cases. The second view point sees media self-regulation as an educational tool for both the journalists – since it imposes high professional standards – and the public – since it demands more vigilant media literacy. The third viewpoint considers self regulation as a tool for media accountability. However, in closed societies, self regulation is mainly a form of advocacy.

Particular attention is placed on the second point of view which sees media self regulation as an education tool for both the journalist and the public. This aspect provides a platform for the media institution to determine the benchmark of job specifications for journalists and at the same time imposes self scrutiny obligations on individual journalists. Where elements of self regulation are strong, the individual journalist is challenged to take steps that would ensure that a minimal standard of scholarship (objectivity) is maintained in his output. The public also has to prime his inquisitiveness and ability to query and question what is churned out as information. In the same vein, self regulation as an educational tool ensures that those who are in the system as practitioners are constantly challenged to embrace mandatory educational improvement that will enhance quality, objectivity and promote professional self determinism.

When it is properly established, press council is probably the best-known mechanism for the enforcement of media self-regulation. It is a flexible structure which is normally shaped according to the local cultural, historical and political contexts and traditions. Because a council has no power to force anyone to do anything, its efficiency depends on the cooperation of all groups involved – proprietors, reporters and the public. That association is as important for what it implies as for what it can achieve. It implies that it is not acceptable for someone to use a news medium as he/she wants, just because she/he owns it or possesses political power. By setting up a tripartite council, owners acknowledge that their employees are entitled to a major say in the process, and journalists acknowledge that media users also have a function. That is a great step for civic engagement and democracy. According to Lloyd (2011) the following are features of accountability systems that are effective: they must be perceived as credible by the public and therefore: Must be seen to act independently of their sponsors/funders, government, powerful commercial interests and those in control of the media, must be seen to be effective in addressing breaches of agreed-upon codes standards. Should contribute towards raising standards in the media they regulate and must be based on widely accepted codes of ethics/standards which are regarded as legitimate by the different sectors within the media (owners, editors and journalists) as well as by the public. The codes should be seen as a form of social contract between stakeholders in the media and the public.

Conclusion

There is a thin demarcation between media accountability structures and regulations. However, while the term *regulation* could be said to include laws, licensing and setting of rules for broadcasters, etc. media accountability structures refer to an agreed-upon code of ethics/standards (such as truth, accuracy and fairness) and therefore facilitate media accountability to the public. Such media accountability systems do not replace laws such as those dealing with defamation, but provide (if effective) an alternative, more efficient, cost-effective and speedy redress. Thus, effective media accountability systems must be able to stimulate and enhance trust in the media. This paper therefore calls attention to the need for a self regulatory model that will guide journalism practice in Nigeria.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that Nigerian journalists are supported to perform their traditional roles as members of the fourth estate of the realm, contributing to the growth of Nigeria’s nascent democracy, strengthen our values; there is urgent need to review the current media accountability systems. The current high level government presence in the regulation of the profession of journalism should be reviewed to accommodate more of the civil societies who are generally the consumers. Funding of regulatory structures should not be concentrated in the hand of a single body or stakeholder. The control of regulatory structures should lie with the civil societies and not with government, media owners or journalists.

REFERENCES

Akinfeleye, R. A. (2003) Fourth estate of the realm or fourth estate of the wreck: Imperative of social responsibility of the press. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered on Wednesday May 14, 2003, University of Lagos, Nigeria.

- Best Forum (2009) Publishers Ombudsman Begins Operations Today. Retrieved from <http://www.nigerianbestforum.com/generaltopics/?p=6679> (10 June, 2009)
- Levy, L. W. (1966). Freedom of the press from Zenger to Jefferson. N.Y. The Bobbs Merrill Co. Inc.
- Lloyd, L. (2011). Watchdogs and news hounds holding the media to account – mechanisms, principles and practices from around the world. In Fes_Media African series, Namibia: Fesmedia Africa
- NPC (2012). Code of ethics for Nigerian journalists 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.presscouncil.gov.ng/?p=165> (20 December, 2012)
- Siebert, F., Peterson, T. and Schram, S. (1972). Four theories of the press. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Vanguard Newspaper. (2012), February 20 Nigerian Press Council Act Violates rights of free speech- Court. Vanguard Newspaper. Retrieved from <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/07/nigerian-press-council-act-violates-rights-of-free-speech-%E2%80%94-court/> (29 July, 2010)
- Zlatev, O. (2011) Media accountability systems (MAS) and their applications in South East Europe and Turkey. In Professional Journalism: Self-Regulation and New Media, Old Dilemmas in South East Europe and Turkey. Paris: UNESCO

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

