

World Press Freedom Day and Safety of Journalists: Implication for People's Freedom of Expression

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Abstract

Every 3rd of May in the year, the world celebrates the freedom of the press. The celebration often serves as a reminder on the need for the protection of the Fundamental Human Rights and Freedom of Expression as embedded in the universal declaration of Human Rights as well as the constitution of countries that are liberal democracies. In the past decade however, the World Press Freedom Day has remained a constant reminder of the escalation of violence and conflicts all over the world. The consequences of which journalists and other media workers have had to bear in their quest/bid to fulfill a sacred mission: the people deserve the right to know. Statistically, more than 1000 media professionals were said to have been killed in the line of duty. Some of these killings were state organised, while very few cases were investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. In Nigeria, in spite of the nation's democratic experience, a sizeable number of journalists and media professionals had been harassed, intimidated and murdered, in the discharge of their duties especially with the Boko Haram insurgence. This study examines the impact of the World Press Freedom Day to the safety of journalists and other media professionals with the specific focus on Nigeria. It also wishes to draw attention to the vital role of the media in promoting sustainable peace, democracy and development. The paper adopts a historical observation method and hopes to underscore the connection between the safety of journalists and peoples freedom of expression.

Keywords: World Press Freedom Day, Journalists, Journalism, Violence and Conflict, Sustainable Peace, Democracy and Development.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is assumed to play an important part in the collective life of a community or nation, and as a result, the press itself has to be governed, organized and conducted according to the same fundamental principles (such as the freedom of speech, equality of all citizens and the rule of law) that govern the rest of the society (McQuail, 2013: 5). Journalism is therefore, a necessary condition for these principles because it is a primary medium of public expression that provides all citizens with information for and advice for forming opinions and making choices. Hence, there can be no real public space and no opportunity to participate in processes of self-government without journalism.¹ According to Garnham (1990: 364), journalists perform two major functions within the public sphere; the collection and dissemination of information; and the provision for a forum for debate. However, in the twenty-first century, the space for free expression, even in long-established liberal democracies has been and is being eroded (White, 2007). Although, this erosion occurs in various ways, the most dramatic is violence and threat of physical intimidation (ibid.). Combating these menaces and violence that threaten free information is important not only in itself but as part of a larger battle for peace, democracy, and prosperity in the world (James, 2007: 10). It is in line with this argument that the study purposes to examine the impact of the World Press Freedom Day on the safety of journalists and other media professionals with specific reference to the Nigerian experience. To achieve this purpose, we draw attention to the vital role of the media in promoting sustainable peace, democracy and development drawing on the social responsibility and mutual responsibility theories of the press.

Journalism Practice: An Overview

There are several challenges that the journalism profession encounters. Of these challenges, McQuail (2013) identifies issues of freedom, obligation to others, and accountability for meeting any obligations that are acknowledged, as the key issues/challenges that journalism practitioners face. While the Swedish parliament's 1766 adoption of its first law protecting the freedom of the press has been considered the world's first freedom of information legislation, the United States' first amendment, which states that the government will not create any laws that might impinge on free speech or free press, has been argued to have fuelled the fires of every revolutionary movement for the past two centuries (Lisosky and Henrichsen, 2011: 5-6). This issue of press freedom has resulted in the formulation of normative media theories by several scholars (Siebert et al, 1956;

¹ McQuail, 2013:5.

McQuail, 1983; Christians et al, 2009).

Ensuring press freedom is the basis of the inauguration in 1998, every 3rd day in May as World Press Freedom day. In a keynote conference on World Press Freedom Day in 2007, UNESCO's Director-General describes World Press Freedom Day as "an occasion to remind the world of the importance of protecting the fundamental human right of freedom of expression enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [...] violence against media professionals constitutes one of the greatest threats to freedom of expression". Today's crisis of freedom and democracy is the war on words waged by displeased governments and other belligerents who generate unreasonable fears simply by choosing journalists as their primary targets (Lisosky & Henrichsen, 2011: xvii). The intricate relationship between journalism and conflict has been complex yet essential, which makes the question of protection for those who report during conflict worth exploring (Lisosky and Henrichsen, 2011: 1).

The safety of journalists is an issue that affects us all (Matsuura, 2007: 4). During times of both peace and conflict, journalists play a vital role in ensuring that the space for freedom of expression is kept open in order to build democratic societies which are just and participatory; therefore, a safe working environment should be guaranteed (UNESCO, 2012: 7). Media reporting of armed conflict and other situations of heightened violence has become increasingly perilous, with large number of journalists and other media personnel killed or deliberately targeted because of their professional work, by government forces and non-government actors (Saul, 2008: 99). Attempts by state and non-state actors to silence or restrict journalists not only deny journalists their rights but also jeopardize the fundamental right of society at large to be kept informed (UNESCO, 2012: 7). Every aggression against a journalist is an attack on people's most fundamental freedoms because press freedom and freedom of expression cannot be enjoyed without basic security (Matsuura, 2007: 4).

The consequences for press freedom and quality of journalism of these attacks are potentially devastating (White, 2007: 14). Many journalists have been attacked and killed with impunity. This has resulted in an arousal of fear and uncertainty through self-censorship, which has resulted in superficial journalism and subsequent weakening of press freedom and the watchdog role of the media (ibid). Impunity exists and flourishes when there is the absence of political will to properly investigate these crimes/attacks (White, 2007: 13). During armed conflict, where other civil society actors are either absent or muted, journalists are among a precious few remaining actors capable of exposing illegality (Saul, 2008: 100). However, impunity/attacks against them remain the single-most challenging threat to press freedom and injustice that face modern journalism (White, 2007: 13).

Media casualties in conflict can be attributed to various causes, from deliberate execution of journalists to poor training and preparedness by media organisations, reckless risk-taking and sheer bad luck (Saul, 2008: 101). The importance of both the safety of journalists and the fight against impunity were addressed in 1997 by the adoption of resolution 29 by UNESCO's general conference, which condemns violence against journalists and calls on its member states to uphold their obligations to prevent, investigate, and punish crimes against journalists (UNESCO, 2012: 11). Furthermore, the Medellin Declaration, issued in 2007 in conjunction with World Press Freedom Day, reiterated the call upon member states to focus on securing the safety of journalists and combating impunity in both conflict and non-conflict situations (UNESCO, 2012: 11). However, protecting journalists cannot be left to national governments especially when these are part of a conflict which is widely covered by the press (Kuttub, 2007: 20). As a result, UNESCO has designed series of activities aimed at raising awareness about journalists' safety and the issue of impunity. Some of its efforts include: World Press Freedom Day, celebrated every year on May 3rd, and the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, intended to honour the work of an individual or organization defending or promoting freedom of expression anywhere in the world, especially in dangerous conditions (UNESCO, 2012: 11).

Aim(s) and Objectives

This paper focuses on the assessment of the World Press Freedom Day, its implication for the safety of journalists with specific reference to the peculiarly of the Nigerian situation.

Besides this, the paper specifically considers the following objectives as its guide post, consequently the paper seeks to:

1. Explore how securing the safety of journalists and combating impunity for crimes promote the fundamental right of freedom of expression.
2. Determine the connection between press freedom, safety of journalists and impunity
3. Address the rising challenges to the safety of journalists and media workers
4. Explore how the safety of journalists and media workers in conflict situations can be guaranteed
5. Initiate actions to provide safety for journalists

Study Approach

The study adopted both historical and document observation approaches.

The historical aspect focuses on movement from the global level, how journalists and media workers had been objects of assassinations and murders.

It also draws attention to the points of convergence on the cases cited especially on the issue of justice – as the killers of journalists have gone unpunished. On the other hand documents detailing various experiences are observed, nothing various experiences, and drawing allusions linking global views with contemporary Nigerian experiences, especially on the issue of justice.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study is informed by Siebert et al's (1956) four theories of the press, especially the social responsibility theory. The social responsibility theory was born to improve on the libertarian theory of the press, which was hinged on a negative concept of liberty based on 'freedom from external restraint' (Peterson, 1956: 93). The social responsibility theory however, is based on a positive concept of liberty and rests on 'freedom for' (ibid.). The social responsibility theory is important because it suggests a direction in which thinking about freedom of the press is heading and poses the social responsibility of the press as a safeguard against totalitarianism (Peterson, 1956: 75). The theory was developed based on early codes of the media, which advised them to practice responsibility to the general welfare, sincerity, truthfulness, impartiality, fair play, decency, and respect for the individual's privacy (ibid: 85). However, the Commission on Press Freedom believed the standards of these codes were not high enough to insure the kind of press the society required (ibid: 87).

To ensure that the press operated within higher standards, the Commission highlighted five requirements of the press. According to the Commission, the press is to provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning; to serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; should project a representative picture of the constituent groups in society; be responsible for the presentation and clarification of goals and values of the society; and provide full access to the day's intelligence by protecting freedom of expression (Peterson, 1956).

This theory is relevant to this study because it accepts the role of the press in servicing the political system, in enlightening the public, and in safeguarding the liberties of the individual (Peterson, 1956: 74). However, the recent trend of attacks against the press confirms the opinion of the social responsibility theory that "the press has been deficient in performing these tasks" (Peterson, 1956: 74). With regards to freedom repression from the government, the social responsibility theory holds that the government must not merely allow freedom, but also actively promote it (Peterson, 1956: 95)

The World of Impunity against Journalists

All over the world, at least 70 journalists were said to have been killed in 2013. This figure shows the following representation across countries;

1. Syria – 29
2. Iraq – 10
3. Nigeria – 10
4. Egypt – 6
5. Pakistan – 5
6. Somalia – 4
7. India – 3
8. Brazil – 3
9. Philippines – 3
10. Russia – 2
11. Mali – 2
12. Turkey – 1
13. Bangladesh – 1
14. Colombia – 1
15. Libya – 1

These figures were documented by the New York based committee to protect journalists. This committee has been tracking deaths among reporters and broadcasters since 1992. However, the CPJ is still examining the deaths of an additional 25 journalists whose deaths have not been accounted for across the world. The CPJ equally reports that 63 journalists, in addition to the figure of 70 cited in an earlier part of this work, have been killed, covering the conflict in Syria. Within this year alone - 2014 – sixty journalists have been abducted in Syria. Thirty are still missing while an American journalist, James Foley was beheaded by the ISIS early this year. Similarly 4 Aljazeera reporters covering happenings in Egypt have also been sentenced to jail.

These manifestations affirm what CPJ's Africa programme coordinator, Tom Rhodes said while noting the precarious situation under which journalists in Nigeria operate. According to him, "Reporting in Nigeria has become an increasingly hazardous profession as the list of unsolved journalist murders in the country continues

to grow.” This is however, not peculiar to Nigeria alone.

The dead in Syria included a number of citizen journalists working to document events in their home-country as well as broadcasters who worked with media outlets affiliated with either the government or the opposition, and a handful of correspondents with foreign news organisations including an Aljazeera reporter, Mohamed al-Meracma.

In Egypt 6 reporters were killed while reporting events as a result of the ousting of Egyptian President, Mohamed Morsi. Drawing attention to the locality of the situation in Syria and the implication for journalists working in the area, the CPJ’s deputy director, Robert Matrone said that, the Middle East has become a killing field for journalists. While the number of journalists killed for their work has declined in some places, the civil war in Syria and a renewal of sectarian attacks in Iraq have taken an agonizing toll.

Many of the deaths occurred during combat or among reporters covering conflict zones however, journalists in several countries were also murdered after reporting on sensitive issues. For example, journalists who covered various issues such as police brutality, political corruption, drug trafficking, and other sensitive criminal issues were killed in places like Brazil, Colombia, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Russia. For example, two Radio France International journalists were abducted and subsequently killed by the Tuaregs in Kidel, Mali. Militants in Iraq, were said to have killed five members of staff of Salaeddin TV in a similar attack in the channel’s offices in Tukrif, Iraq.

This list summarizes the global picture of what has befallen the journalists, just in 2013. Perhaps, 2013 appears to be second bloodiest only to 2006 on record of murders and unexplained deaths of journalists and media workers. (List (CPJ) retrieved 27 – 08 – 2014).

Nigeria: The Contemporary Story

Between 2006 till date, 10 journalists have been killed in Nigeria especially during the period when the Boko Haram insurgency became most prominent. In 2010; three journalists working with Christian newspapers were killed while a reporter with The Nation newspaper was killed.

In Jos, Capital of Plateau State, two journalists were killed – they are; Deputy Editor, The Light Bearer, Nathan S. Dabak, and Reporter, Sunday Gyang Brede. Ubagwu, a reporter with The Nation was killed in Lagos. A member of the editorial board of This Day newspaper, Paul Abayomi Ogundeji was killed in 2008, while Bayo Ohu, political editor, This Day was killed in 2009. Akogwu Enenche, a television reporter with Channels TV was shot dead (2012) in Kano while trying to interview witnesses of the bombings in the northern city of Kano. Akogwu’s death was linked to the activities of the sectarian terrorist group, Boko Haram. Zakamya Isa was also killed by the same group in 2011 while Ngmsok Sallah, a journalist with Highland FM Radio in Jos, was also killed in Jos. Only recently the Managing Editor (Northern operations) of the New Telegraph newspaper, Mallam Suleiman Bisalla was killed in Abuja in a bomb blast that occurred in a shopping mall (2014).

Nigeria is ranked 112th out of 180 countries on the Reporters without borders press freedom index above India, Mexico and below Kenya and Uganda. This was contrary to claims by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan that his government is press friendly. Both the government through the security agents especially the military on one side and the insurgent group, Boko Haram on the other, are both cracking down on the press. While Boko Haram engages deadly tactics, the military engages tactics that are economically suffocating.

Boko Haram in 2012 blew-up the offices of This Day newspaper in Abuja and Kaduna. Its sin was that the newspaper has angered the Muslims, a decade ago, when one of the columnists denigrated the Prophet Mohammed by alluding to the prophet’s strong appetite for beautiful women. The military on the other hand, claiming to be working under intelligence reports, accused newspaper organizations of working in league with the insurgents by helping them to conceal and transport explosives in their delivery vans. The consequence was that the army seized newspaper print-outs, halted distribution across the country, ransacked offices of newspapers distributors and agents, detained staff for several hours. The implication resulted in losses running into millions of naira.

While press freedom is guaranteed under the Nigerian Constitution, in reality the media face retribution that is “episodic, unpredictable and very often arbitrary”, said John Campbell, a former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Going after the wrong “Big Man”, or politically well-connected person, can be dangerous.

“In a general climate of lawlessness, if a newspaper publishes something that a big man or some part of the government doesn’t like, it’s likely to have its offices ransacked by a mob”, Campbell said.

Nigerian journalists are still killed for their work, just as activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged by the military government in 1995. The Committee to Protect Journalists names Nigeria as one of 13 countries where the murder of a journalist is most likely to go unpunished.

Since 2009 at least five journalists have been murdered with no perpetrators brought to justice. From Dele Giwa, Tunde Oladapo, Okezie Amaruben, Jidelis Ikwuebe, Nansok Sallah, Edo Sule Ugbagwu, Bayo Ohu,

Natham Dabak, Bolade Farari, Modu Gubro, Enenche Akogwu, Bagauda Kalto, Kris Imodidbie and Tayo Awotusin, (Kris and Tayo were killed while covering the Liberian civil war under President Charles Taylor). Statistics compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists according to Barry James (a Paris-based reporter in a UNESCO publication on safety journalist and impunity) indicates that full justice was achieved in only 6.7 percent of the cases in which newsmen and women were killed in the course of their duties between January 1, 1992 and June 18, 2007. Writing further, Barry says that the CPJ believes that half of these killings were carried out by either government officials, by political parties or the military. This shows that many governments that are signatories to the UN Charter on Human Right are blatantly ignoring it.

Conclusion and Actions to provide safety for journalists

To ensure the safety of journalists, "international laws with teeth are more than ever needed to put a stop to criminal acts against journalists, while at the same time, journalists on the firing line must defend their neutrality" (Kuttab, 2007: 20). A number of measures have been adopted by the United Nations (UN) to strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms designed to ensure the safety of journalists in both conflict and non-conflict areas (UNESCO, 2012: 7). These measures include:

- Enforcement of laws by States to ensure that the perpetrators of crimes and acts of violence against media professionals and associated personnel are brought to justice, as well as taking preventive measures to ensure that such crimes are not committed in the first place.
- Provision of support to a number of organisations in order to deliver safety and risk awareness training for journalists and media workers.
- Publishing guidelines and publications that provide practical safety information to journalists and media workers.

Achieving the safety and protection of journalists and media workers requires the active involvement of the media industry and a number of other parties, including professional associations and unions, NGOs specialising in this issue, as well as the United Nations system, and in particular UNESCO, which is the sole UN agency with the mandate to defend and promote freedom of expression and its corollary press freedom (UNESCO, 2012: 7).

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