

Specialized Reporting In Nigeria: Strengths, Weaknesses and a Problematic Understanding

Abiodun Adeniyi, Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, Baze University, Abuja

Salisu Suleiman

Lecturer 1, Department of Mass Communication, Baze University, Abuja, Nigeria

Abstract

Beat reporting in Nigeria grew from the early 1980's, onto the 90's and onwards. It was out of an attempt to perfect news reporting, by encouraging specialization amongst reporters. This paper analyses the expansion of the trend, from when, particularly, private newspapers were established, up until the coming of online journalism, reasoning that while the private media organisations gave further meaning to the practice, the public media had earlier engaged in it through only a concentration on government departments. It noted the evolution of sundry beats in the county's journalism space as including Ports, Judiciary, Defence, Foreign Affairs, Information Technology, Crime, Science, Health, Technology, Travel and Tourism, Entertainment, Lifestyle, Business, Police Affairs, Energy, Politics, Transport, Sports, City, Education, Culture, Religion, Aviation, Oil and Gas, amongst others, arguing that while the outlining of these beats were concerted attempts at improving the quality of news reports, and the coverage of different sectors of society, there are still more definition of beats to be done. And beyond that is the need for the beats to be understood as news sources rather than income sources, as the profession grapples with differentiated levels of perversions, mediocrity, and corruption.

1. INTRODUCTION

Media ownership had been dominated by government for many post-independent years. Individuals who tried owning media organisations were hardly able to sustain them (Uyo, 1987). Many die soon after birth. Those funded by government were, therefore, prominent in influence and in continuity. For these government owned media, the priority were usually the coverage of states and government houses. In further reporting the activities of government, general beat reporters were regularly attached to government officials as they performed state duties. The most notable publicly owned media houses of those eras were the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), for the electronics, and *the New Nigeria* and the *Daily Times* for the print. These four were owned by the Federal government. State governments then had their versions of the media, in the form of newspapers, mainly. Some state owned press included *The Tide* (Rivers State), *The Statesman* (Imo State), *Triumph* (Kano State), *The Herald* (Kwara State) *The Lagos Horizon* (Lagos State), *The Scope* (Kaduna State), *The Voice* (Benue State), *The Chronicle* (Cross Rivers State), and *The Observer* (Edo State).

The potency of these media organisations was not going to last. Alaka (2014) analyzed: "The advent of privately-owned media houses...with their unbiased laissez faire approach to news coverage and reportage...the reading public in no time began switching allegiance and what was left of the old brigades' readership was swept away. Their vibrant administrative set up and welfare package also meant massive brain-drain for the government papers, as media professionals moved en masse to the emerging media. The fact that journalists also operated under greater freedom also encourage the migration, which was like the final blow on the state-owned papers"

The writer continued: "Of course the readers' apathy and switch of allegiance has also meant dwindling fortune and poor revenue, leading to more reliance on the governments of the day for funding. Ultimately, this has meant additional burden to the government's scarce resources, which needs to choose wisely on where to vote its fund. Sequel to the issue of funding has also been lack of modern publishing equipment, including tools as little as computers and the internet. This of course has led to poor quality papers that cannot compete with the frontline privately-owned papers. Even things as basic as office is said to be lacking for some state-owned media houses correspondents, who now operate from NUJ offices in their locations". As the fortunes, influence and strength of the federal and state government owned media plummeted, the private media did not just began taken over, but did with quality journalism, including the expansion of specialized and investigative reporting as this paper argues.

2. METHODOLOGY

Secondary data alongside observation was used in writing this paper. Data were sourced from materials on specialized reporting as it relates to its evolution in the Nigerian context, while my observation of the processes, as a keen follower of the press in Nigeria complemented the secondary application of data. I observed the birth

and growth of some key private newspapers like *The Guardian*, *National Concord*, (now defunct) *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, *The Sun*, *Daily Champion*, *Vanguard*, and *Thisday*, over years and witnessed how the organisations redefined a trend, similar to its ideal pattern of operation, as in the developed West, and how the redefinition stimulated the profession to no end. The private media organisations were then in stiff competition. Many did not want to be outdone in in-depth reporting. And one route to this was specialized reporting, which they all tried to perfect. In doing this the quality of journalism improved, with specialized reporting standing as an epitome of this improvement. As a witness to this process, it is possible to locate its many dimensions, while also complementing it with secondary data.

2.1: DEFINING A BEAT FOR THE NEWSHOUND: THE STRENGTH OF A TREND

Specialized reporting seeks to split news sources into units while a reporter takes charge of it to encourage expertise. News sources could be public or private departments, agencies, entities, events, occurrences, or processes. They are situations for the generation of stories and news ideas. For some active beats, like the ports and state government houses, the stories might be daily, or even hourly. Some beats might be “dryer”, as stories could be coming just every once in a while. For others, activities could be periodic, like for the Religious affairs reporter who gets busy mainly during religious festivals. A creative reporter might be able to generate stories, infact good stories; in the event of scantiness of news from his/her news beat. S/he might seek for interviews, describe a scene, or begin an investigation on a worthy issue. S/he can also write a news feature article in the meantime, until activities pick up again. It is all dependent on the creative and perceptive ability of the personnel manning a particular beat. More importantly, specialized reporting is designed to increase expertise, deepen understanding, increase responsibility of a reporter in charge of a beat, bring about more knowledgeable reports, and then promote good journalism.

“Specialised reporting, according to Obe (2005:45), simply means reporting from special areas or fields. It is a clear departure from the general type of reporting that is not focused on particular fields or areas. It is therefore referred to as reporting specialties. Specialization is not unique to journalism alone. Other professions like law and medicine also have their areas of specialization. For law, some lawyers specialize in maritime law, company and allied matters, criminal law, civil law, jurisprudence, etc. For medicine, specialization is even more pronounced. In some advanced western nations, you must specialize before you are allowed to practice” (Cited online: 2014).

Specialized reporting is more like division of labour. Labour is shared between personnel for efficiency, for increased productivity, and better enterprise promotion. It helps quick execution of assignments, and enhances acquaintance ability. As noted in the above quote, many professions do specialize. In law for instance, there are Company law, Land law, Law of Contract, Marine Law, Constitutional Law, Property Law, and International Law, amongst others. In Engineering, there is Civil Engineering, Petroleum Engineering, Computer Engineering, and Aeronautic Engineering, amongst others. Medicine has a bunch of specialties. The list: Orthopedic, pediatrician, gynecologist, endocrinologist, cardiologist, neurosurgeon, and Ear, Nose and Throat, amongst others. Specialization had initially come from an understanding that no one should be like the proverbial “Jack of all trade, and master of none”. It is more sensible to take on an area and belabor it, thereby, growing in it for the good of the self, and even for the populace that is being served. Philosophy had initially embrace many a subject-matter, before being divided and subdivided into units, sub-units to enable deeper understandings in man’s continuing attempt to interpret life, give meanings to situations, and systematize existential processes. With specializations, work paces are faster, and expertise is higher, which may in the end impact on profitability and productivity.

Specialization, therefore, reduces need for supervision, helps eliminate waste, creates room for upward mobility, and makes personnel difficult to replace. As it evolved in Nigerian journalism, some personnel became very famous with some beats. Beats that produced famous personnel at different points in time, and for different media organisations, included the State House beat, Aviation, Defence, Education, Transportation, and Foreign Affairs/Diplomatic beats, amongst others. *The Guardian*, *National Concord* (before going under), *Thisday*, and *Daily Trust*, the NTA, and FRCN were some of the media organisations easily listed as having produced some good beat journalists over the years. Even at the risk of improper representation, a few examples might be helpful. They are: Chris Ngwu and Sola Atere-notable State House correspondents for the NTA at different times. While Ngwu covered the State House in the period of Gen. Sani Abacha, Atere covered it while President Olusegun Obasanjo held sway in the early part of his second coming.

They were notable for the mastery of the beat, their understanding of state matters, and their professional and ethical approach to their news reports. Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo covered the Aviation beat for *The Guardian*, as well as Juliet Ukabiala covered the Defence beat, with vitality, and vibrancy, eventually leaving them with the reputations of being remarkable beat reporters. Same could also be said of Victor Ifijeh’s coverage of the political beat for the *National Concord*. It is even more so with Akpo Esajere as a political reporting and editing journalist for *The Guardian*. Esajere is easily one of the longest serving beat journalists in the history of

the profession in Nigeria. He is well educated, well experienced, and very familiar with trends of the nation's politics. A quintessential prose stylist, Esajere craves simple and telling prose, in the documentation of political activities. The trait has combined to literally make him a case study in the evaluation of specialized reporting in the country. From his offhand knowledge of key dates of political occurrences, his familiarity with political actors and gladiators, and his regular prognosis of political situations, it is easier to gauge how expertise blossom with specialized reporting.

More specifically, the specialized, beat reporter has a good understanding of names, people and processes on his/her place of assignment. S/he has multiple contacts in that area, and could check up stories, double check facts, and hear other sides, with great ease, in short pace of time, much unlike the uninitiated general beat reporter. The good specialized reporter is a repository of knowledge on his/her area. S/he is often on first name basis with key sources on the beat, and can even sometimes be some kind of confidant. Sometimes, they are butts of banter and jokes with key figures. Former President Obasanjo had reportedly got fond of Onukaba Adinoyi-Ojo when the latter was *The Guardian* Aviation Correspondent. Gen. Ibrahim Babangida as military president was reputed for being at home with names of many media correspondents then attached to the state house. The familiarity often stretches, sometimes creating little or no line between a professional and social relationship. Some of the relationships have even grown to be lifelong, leaving the profession as its trigger.

Importantly as well, the growth of specialised reporting in Nigeria is still continuing. The reason is that the fragments are not yet as detailed as could be found elsewhere. For instance, it is not yet a practice to have beats like Football Correspondent, Tennis Writer, Basketball reporter, or Golf analyst as you will find elsewhere. The entire beats are yet grouped under the Sports beat in Nigeria. In other climes as well, you may find reporters, or photojournalists attached to some famous personalities, and celebrities, but the personnel who are concerned about such matters in Nigeria are yet regarded as Society, Celebrity, or Lifestyle journalists. The Nigerian version is yet to be broken down into focusing on personalities, events and social practices. There is a higher likelihood that it might get to this stage of sophistication in the future: This is against the background of continuing growth, but the present state is nevertheless an indication of an earlier stimulation of a professional genre.

3.1: MISUNDERSTANDING THE ATTEMPT AT PERFECTING PROFESSIONALISM

This paper has argued in the foregoing that specialized reporting came in the bid to initiate quality reporting, and then better satisfy the reader. It also argued that increasing competition amongst private media helped the development of the trend, besides noting its advantage to productivity, quicker execution of assignments and the development of expertise. Through specialized reporting, reporters also get familiar with personalities, key actors and actresses on their beat. Many become friends, sometimes lasting a lifetime. Irrespective of the benefits of the trend to journalism and the audience, it has come with its many downsides revolving around getting neck deep in the concerns of the beat, instead of keeping an expected professional distance; tendency for one-sided reports, only favorable to the beat; deviations from story writing to business deals; complacency and lethargy in the evaluation of news originating from the beat; and compromising professional ethics, amongst others.

In getting too involved, neck deep in the affairs of the beat, some journalists sometimes forget their watchdog role, and start sounding and writing as if they were of the organisation. A strength of specialized reporting reflected in good knowledge of personalities on the beat is taken too far: It is now genuflections to the actors. The reporter now begins to kow-tow to the whims and caprices of the beat management, even assuming the role of a regular worker, or working like an arm of the organisation. The reporter works often to please the organisation, and is wary of writing reports that will offend their sensibilities. A key role of the media, which is to keep the organisation on its tow, to deliver on its statutory objective, is unconsciously relegated to the background. The trust of the readers in the reporter is now betrayed, abused and even discarded. The essence of the assignment to the beat is waded for pecuniary gains, eventually cheapening professionalism.

Added to the above is the emergence of one sided reports. In this situation, the reporter is no longer able to balance stories: S/he begins to write essentially from the management perspective, as if s/he were their spokesperson. The point of view of the management would rather be better and completely protected, if not balanced with any other. One example of this can be seen in media reports during the display of the usual tension between the arms of government, especially the Executive and the Legislature. When this happens, it is common to see some correspondents from either side, writing only from the standpoint of their beat, even when there are opportunities to reflect the opinion of the otherside. In these cases, actors from both ends expect the reporter to sympathize with them through their reports.

The beat reporter is now also exposed to contracts and business deals. Many turn to proposal writers, and grow into cartels, in the bid to moonlight. The trend is rationalized on grounds of poor or delayed salary, leading to the sourcing of alternative income. In some beats, the attraction is to be put on a foreign trip with the beat helmsman. The trips are paid for: tickets, estacode, and all. The adventure is equally desirable. Many long for the tourism delight, and always ever hope to be patronized with an inclusion on the helmsman's entourage.

As a result, they are careful with reports, and hardly would write an offensive one, even if warranted. In doing this however, the mission on the beat is undermined. Ethics is compromised, while professionalism takes a back stage. The result will then be poor evaluation of news, or a complete laziness to even report basic stories. Some case reports as would be discussed below will suffice.

3.2: DEALINGS ON NEWS BEATS: SOME CASE REVIEWS

The Presidential Villa, otherwise called the State House is one of the most prominent beats in the nation's journalism practice. The beat is naturally prominent, like most other presidential beats because it is the seat of power. The first citizen leaves and works from there. Activities abound aplenty. Hardly dry, the beat is sure to fetch headline reports now and again, because of the prime position that stories emanating from there would be given. Those who cover the beats are likely to be well known, easily becoming famous, and may as well court the envy of peers. The state house beat has moved from Dodan Barracks, Lagos, to the Aso Rock Villa in Abuja. At least fifty reporters have covered this beat at any one time, and they are drawn from different newspapers, magazines, Television and Radio stations. Amongst those who have covered this beat have been some of the nation's most illustrious reporters, correspondents and writers, just as the beat has also had some of the nation's most questionable journalism characters.

The beat exposes journalists to key government officials, bureaucrats, diplomats and technocrats. It is largely an influential beat, which is why it has often featured in the discussion of media beats' in relation to professional ethics. In the dying days of military president, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida regime, the departing president had reportedly given the army of reporters what was duped a parting gift. N50, 000 (\$150 dollars) was allegedly handed out to each journalist. Alex Kabba, then a member of the State House press corps, and then writing for the *Tempo* newsmagazine had reported the story, in what enraged sections of the corps, and the giving parties, and provoked many employees of the corps to ask questions from their reporters. And even long after the scandal, there have been rumours, and perceptions of a perversion of the beat reporting processes and procedures on the state house news front.

Some of this has hovered around lame and uncritical reporting and analysis of events, and to occasional self-pre-editing to leave out stories that should ordinarily have been written. Some reporters on this beat often fear that their accreditation might get withdrawn, or ceased, and would therefore want to be "compliant", to avoid the sanction. Some also do get subtle or open threat of being banned from the beat forever. The intimidation and blackmail could be mild or overt; it nevertheless sends a message of discomfort to the receiving journalist, somewhat doing him/her a disservice. As it were, a web of factors work to determine the state of the journalist condition with the beat, as in the case of the state house beat. In this case, the forces of presidential sensation, influence, environment, and supervising role of the state security apparatchik, combine to determine how well s/he can perform. If s/he is aggressive, s/he might be duped a security risk, and then eased or forced out. If otherwise, s/he might be seen as patronizing. Either way, the reporter is caught in a quandary that requires some intelligent professional balancing, which can be difficult to achieve.

Equally important in the matrix is the National Assembly beat. The reporter here could be referred to as the legislative reporter, or simply the assembly reporter. It all depends on the preference of the news organisation. These set of reporters are just a shade away from the state house press corps, in terms of influence. Reason being that they cover a critical section of government: The Federal Legislature, which is a key arm of the trinity that includes the executive and the judiciary. In this case, they also have to deal with several legislatures. Meaning that, apart from covering the activities of the house from the chamber, they also would have to cover the heads of the houses, even in their personal capacities; then cover the National Assembly bureaucracy, and are then exposed to covering individual legislators, alongside their razzmatazz. The assembly context is therefore nebulous, expansive and regularly requires many hands for good coverage to be attained.

Regardless, the bit that is covered is awash with perceptions of unethical practices. The argument is that the legislature is populated by politicians, who subscribe to no ethical standards. Many are driven by materialism, raw power, and the abuse of it. A lot seeks influence, and popularity, even when they hardly deserve it. The political process is sometimes also replete with mischief, campaigns of calumny, media battles and several conflicts, within and between the three arms of governments. In many of these situations, the reporter on the beat is literally called to arms. S/he is in the forefront of battles, warring directly or indirectly on the part of the legislature.

Stories are now written essentially from the point of view of the legislature, with little or no concern for the other side. In many of these cases, it takes the ingenuity of the editors back in the newsrooms to balance up the stories, with reports from the other parties in the argument. Many reporters in some other situations grow to become buddies of these politicians, in what consciously or unconsciously, prevents a critical outlook to the beat and actors therein. The State House and the National Assembly beats have only been used as examples. Similar experiences manifest in other beats believed to be high in activity, and influence. Such beats are Ports, Energy, Airport, Transport and Judiciary, amongst others.

4.1: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the growth in specialized reporting, also helped by occasional exposure to trainings by agencies and multilateral organisations, the corruption therein arguably exemplifies the alleged corruption in other spheres of the nation's polity. The national campaigns against the malaise may proceed to zero in on professions and special aspects of it. To do this effectively though, salaries and wages of journalists would have to be paid promptly, as at when due. There have been reports of journalists been owed months and years of salaries and allowances. Many have lost the sense of expectations for stated remuneration, believing that it may never even come.

This feeling propel them to seek alternative means of survival while on the beat. As they do this, there ethical guards are lowered, and the profession suffers on the longer run. With regular salaries, the temptation to compromise might be reduced, if not eliminated. Secondly, is the need to introduce welfare packages for the journalists, including retirement benefits, like it is done in the public and in some private sector concerns. A third suggestion is the need not to make beat reporters last long on the position. A year or two could suffice, or just when the reporter is seen to be getting too involved with the concerns of the beat, as against the maintenance of a critical disposition. And finally, erring journalists should always be promptly sanctioned, as deterrence to others, and as signpost of management's distaste for reported corrupt practices on the beat.

REFERENCES

- Akinfeleye, Ralph (2003). "**Fourth Estate of the Realm or Fourth Estate of the Wreck: Imperative of Social Responsibility of the Press**". Inaugural Lecture delivered on May 14, at the University of Lagos, Lagos.
- Alaka, Gboyega, 2014, "**Dwindling fortunes of state-owned newspapers**" Article Published in *The Nation* newspaper, Sunday Magazine, April 27th, 2014.
- Golding, Peter. (1977). "**Media Professionalism in the Third World: the Transfer of an Ideology**" Curran, J. (eds) **Mass Communication and Society**. London: Arnold.
- Head, S. W. (1963). "**Can Journalists be a professional In a Developing Country?**" In **Journalism Quarterly**. 40 (4).
- <https://mcom201newsreporting.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/specialized-reporting-chap.pdf>
- McQuail, D. (2000). **Mass Communication Theory**. London: Sage.
- Pate, U. A. (2002). **Introduction to Conflict Reporting**. Lagos Friedrich Ebert Foundation.
- Uyo, Adidi O. (1987) **Mass Communication Media: Classifications and Characteristics**. New York, USA: Criviletis International.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Abiodun Adeniyi

Dr. Abiodun Adeniyi graduated with a Second Class Upper Honours in Sociology from the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, after which he worked as a reporter and writer for *The Guardian* Newspapers, Nigeria, covering various beats in Lagos and Abuja, for more than a decade. He won the British Chevening Scholarship in 2003 to study International Communications at the University of Leeds, England and began his Ph.D. research immediately after his Master's Degree programme at the same University. He was awarded his doctorate degree in Communication Studies in 2008, for his research on Migrant Nigerians and the Online Mediation of Distance, Longing and Belonging.

Adeniyi returned to his native Nigeria in 2009, working as a Communications Consultant on the platform of the World Bank Economic Reform and Governance Project (ERGP) at the Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP), Presidency, Abuja. On expiration of the project, he became Lead Consultant at Witswords Consults Limited (WCL), Abuja, before joining Baze University as a senior lecturer in Mass Communication. He has been visiting professor of Communications and Multi-Media Design at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), Yola, and an external examiner at the National Open University, Lagos. Widely published, online and offline, in local and foreign journals, his present research interests are in the fields of public relations and advertising, strategic communications, media and governance, and media of diasporas, and especially on how these are facilitated online.

Dr. Salisu Suleiman

Dr. Salisu Suleiman studied mass communication at Bayero University, Kano and worked as information officer and later, press secretary in the Federal Ministry of Water Resources. He was head of e-learning at the Federal Ministry of Information from where he joined the Good Governance Group (3G) in 2009 as communications director before becoming its chief operating officer. He obtained a master's degree in public administration from the University of Abuja and was awarded a PhD in public policy from Nasarawa State University for his study of electronic governance in Nigeria.

An alumnus of Georgetown University's prestigious Georgetown Leadership Seminar, Suleiman was executive editor of the online news platform, NigeriaIntel from 2011 to 2015 and is on the editorial board of the online forum, Nigeria Village Square. He was also a director at the Civic Media Institute of Nigeria, an organisation dedicated to promoting citizen journalism. A widely published columnist with Peoples' Daily, NEXT and Blueprint newspapers, Dr Suleiman teaches at Baze University, Abuja, and has research interests in public information management, new media and e-governance.