

Critical Journalism and Democratic Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

Democratic governance is the most popular system of government the world over. It is the government that enhances human rights as well as political participation among the citizens. Critical journalism is one of the factors of effective democratic governance. This paper is an assessment of the contribution of critical journalism to democratic governance in Nigeria. It adopted the descriptive research method whereby relevant literature, documents and records were consulted and analysed based on existing realities, and anchored on the precepts of the social responsibility theory. The paper reveals that, given the dynamic nature of the technology-driven society, journalism entails more than the mere conventional practice of reporting based on the 5W1H to an in-depth interpretation and analysis of the information so reported. Findings also reveal that, critical journalism has played an invaluable role in the sustenance of democratic governance in Nigeria, especially during the present era (1999- date) of democratic governance in the country. Such roles include checkmating excesses in governance, serving as a watchdog over government and breaching the communication gap between the government and the governed. Based on the findings of this paper it is recommended, among others, that Journalists should strive to go beyond merely reporting based on the 5W1H approach, but engage in in-depth investigation, interpretation and unbiased analysis to upgrade the standard of conventional journalism to critical journalism.

Keywords: Critical journalism, democratic governance, democratic process, social responsibility, watchdog

1. Introduction

The survival and general development of the society depends on certain essential factors such as the communication system. Communication is therefore a critical variable governing the different facets of socio-political development. For a sustainable development and enduring democratic governance to ensue, there must be a commendable interaction and inter-relations amongst the various segments of the society. In fact, such inter-relations between people and state, and other facets of the society in a well established democracy is never static. For Pye (1972, p. 3) "Individual are constantly engaged in adjusting or re-evaluating, either restlessly and critically or gradually and persistently, their emotions and judgments about their collective identity... with the spirit of nationhood constantly changing what is journalism". This calls for a greater reliance on critical journalism. In Nigeria, like in most countries of the world, the role of the mass media in democratic governance at various phases of the nation's history is commendable, yet more still needs to be done in order to catch up with the emerging trends of the contemporary age.

The mass media undoubtedly, have remained in the fore-front of the struggle to promote the rights of Nigerian through a credible democratisation process in particular and governance in general. In fact, the media find it difficult to operate in a non- democratic environment. However, this does not, in any way, imply that the media have been perfect in all circumstances. The problems faced by journalism stem from both internal and external factors. The internal factors are those ones from the media circle, which revolve around professionalism and ethics. This gives rise to instances of professional breaches, defamation, blackmail and misrepresentation of facts, deception and other forms of ethical issues. On the other hand, the external factors that hinder effective journalism are those forces that exert undue influences on journalism from outside the media circle. The external influence could emanate from political, economic, cultural interest groups, etc.

Both the internal of the mass media cause the media to be criticised for being complacent; truncating and subverting democratic processes at certain times. Despite the hard criticism, the media are significant facilitators of the public sphere; they create distinctive discursive space within which individuals combine to assume the full of a politically powerful force (Asemah, 2011). It remains an incontrovertible fact that the Nigerian mass media have played and will continue to play a critical role in the promotion and sustenance of democratic system in Nigeria. This is the whole gamut of journalism in democratic governance. Journalism is the gathering and writing news for the radio, television, newspaper, magazine or any other mass medium. All over the world, journalism provides citizens with the information about government and society at large. With the contemporary socio-political and technological realities, there is the need for a shift from the conventional or traditional journalism to critical journalism.

Critical journalism is journalism that goes well beyond a mere gathering, writing and dissemination of news to the audience, to interpreting and analysing news and information in the language suitable for the survival of the society and strengthening social institutions and governance through credible and objective

reporting. While the conventional journalism mainly concerns with the application of the 5W1H (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?), approach to news writing, critical journalism steps further to include interpreting and analysing the information in order to articulate a high degree of understanding, which culminates into rational discernment among audience members. Unarguably, critical journalism has the potentials of engendering democratic governance. Democratic governance is a kind of governance which guarantees citizens' rights and their participation in the democratic process or general public affairs. It is the most popular and globally accepted system of governance of the time. The thrust of this paper is therefore to examine the contribution of critical journalism in the democratic governance in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the framework of the social responsibility theory. This is because the media, as an institution, is a corporate citizen which primary obligations include contributing positively to the overall development of the society. In this case, the media experience freedom in one hand and external control in the other hand. The social responsibility theory allows for objectivity and accountability of the media and also encourages professionalism in media reportage (Christian, 2004). The theory can be aptly described as a child of the industrial revolution and the emerging multimedia society providing the enabling environment for the media based on assumption that while the press should be free it must nonetheless be responsible (Senam, 2014).

The social responsibility theory owes its origin to the Hutchin commission on the freedom of press (1947). The commission was set up in the United States of America to examine the concept of free press as understood within the libertarian or free press theory. The theory propagates the right of the press to criticise any institution and even government, but it must be responsible enough to maintain the stability of the society. The central theme of the theory therefore is the enhancement of public interest. This involves encouraging press freedom and transmitting fair and accurate information that articulates a debate and democratic decision-making in order to unveil what constitute the interest of the public. It should be noted that: "Whatever the argument about the concept of public interest, it is quite obvious that the mass media have everywhere been a subject of extensive control and regulation by the law and other formal or informal means, with a view to getting them to do what society wants or to prevent them from doing what it doesn't" (McQuail, 2007, p. 165).

Public interest safeguards press freedom which is to be preserved as a vital right of human kind with an unquestionable right to discuss what the law does not expressly forbid. The hallmark of public interest within the purview of the social responsibility theory is press freedom and liberty. In judging the level of public interest, the following requirements must be stressed.

- (i) Freedom of publication
- (ii) Plurality of ownership of the mass media
- (iii) Diversification of information, opinion and culture
- (iv) Support for public order and security of the state
- (v) Extensive reach
- (vi) Quality of information published to the public
- (vii) Adequate support for democratic political system
- (viii) Respect for individuals and general human rights
- (ix) Avoidance of harm and offence to the society and individuals.
- (x) Professionalism and accountability should be upheld by the media

In summary, the social responsibility theory holds that everyone who has something to say should be heard and the media should exhibit a high sense of commitment to the cause of the public and the society as a whole. This would enable the media to contribute meaningfully to democratic governance in the society.

3. Overview of Democracy in Nigeria

Since 1960, when Nigeria gained independence, the country had witnessed a lot of ups and downs on her path to democratic governance. Over the years, the country's political system had encountered turbulence characterised by political controversies military incursions, dashed hopes, poor leadership, systemic failures, political instabilities and violence, among others. The political class have, in most cases, been accused of anti-democratic tendencies that tend to violate constitutional provisions, abuse citizens' rights, promote non-credible elections and show of disrespect for the rule of law. Others are poor service delivery, high level of violent crimes and non-advancement and protection of individual and collective rights. Incidentally, these elements from the core ingredients what differentiate democracy from other forms of governance.

The universal acceptance of democracy as the best system of governance is incontestable. This is predicated on the participatory nature of democracy which affords the citizenry ample opportunity in the selection of their leaders and representatives. It breeds good governance and safeguards fundamental human rights. It remains a fact that out of about 55 years of independent nation hood (1960 till date), Nigeria experienced military rule for about 29 years (1966 -1979 and 1983 – 1999). This was a major strain in the wheel

of democratic governance in the country. Upon the country's return to democracy since 1999, the media have reshaped and stepped up their role in governance.

Democratic governance in Nigeria, like in many other developing countries or countries with nascent democracy, is faced with a myriad of challenges such as leadership tussle, tension-filled election process, poverty and greed, institutional failures, abuse of public office and procedures, corruptions, desperation among the political class, personalisation of state power coupled with ethnic and religious rivalry etc.

The long period of military rule has somehow affected the psyche of the political elites and the general populace has been infected with military and regimental culture of arbitrariness characterised by abused executive fiat, poor accountability, low regard for human rights etc. Despite the fore-going negative tendencies, there is still a green light on the other end of the tunnel. The government of the day has realised the mistakes of the past and has risen up to its responsibilities. The entire citizenry is up in support and protection of true democracy. The media have increased their efforts in contributing to democratic governance; this is where critical journalism is indispensable.

4. Nigerian Media, Critical Journalism and Democratic Governance

Right from the colonial era, the Nigerian media have always been playing some significant roles in governance. Omu (1978) is of the view that the Nigerian media played a fundamental role in disentangling the country from colonial rule. The tempo of the role of the Nigerian media in governance is usually determined by the nature of government in power and the prevailing media system. After independence in 1960, the media were mainly concerned about sustaining the independence and advocating true democracy, but during the military era the media focused attention on how to return governance to civilians. Now that democracy is in place, the attention of the media is on how to sustain democratic governance.

At present, the role of the mass media has a constitutional backing. Section 22, constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, as amended, 2011 provides that:

“The press, radio, television and other agencies of mass media at all times (shall) be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people”. This is obviously a statutory empowerment for the media to play a fundamental role in governance cum responsibility and accountability. This does not however mean that Nigeria media were wallowing on the path of political apathy before the enactment of the 1999 constitution.

Going by the views of Momoh (2002), before 1999 the media were actively engaged in enthroning democracy, thereafter, monitoring the process of governance and generally reporting and interpreting the democratisation process. The driving mechanism of the democratic spirit is vibrant politicking based on issues and principles, plurality of ideas, electoral discipline, diversity of audiences and respect for law and order. Thus, one can safely say that politics is the heartbeat of democracy and political participation is about power, the struggle to possess, use and retain same; it affects everyone and everything in the society (Yusuf, 2001). Going by this assertion, critical journalism remains an invaluable factor in successful democratic governance. This presents the media as being actively engaged in the gathering, analysing and disseminating information on issues of and about politics.

The mass media in Nigeria justifiably focus their attention, in fact, accord high priority to government and those in government. They constitute the bridge between the government and the governed through timely dissemination of information of public significance. In the process, the mass media are partly expected to expose and criticise bureaucratic incompetence, dictatorial tendencies and abuse of power among public officials. This is mainly achieved through critical journalism and nothing less. By reason of the mass media often breaching the gap between the government and the governed, they (the media) become an agency through which citizens constitute themselves (Singer, 2000).

Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution (Supra) has already legitimised the function of the media and imposed on them the role of monitoring and evaluating the performance of governments at all levels. The extent to which the media actualise this constitutional provision in their function is more or less an issue of accountability. For McQuail (2007, p. 207), “Media accountability is all the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answer directly or indirectly to their society”. In all circumstances, within the realm of accountability, the journalist should always bear in mind that, as a trustee, he could be called upon or required at any time and any means to explain or justify his professional actions. Thus for the sake of accountability, the journalist must strike a mutually favourable balance between public responsibility and professional responsibility. A journalist is in a fiduciary relationship with the society. A fiduciary relationship is a relationship that is stringed by utmost trust and confidence.

5. The Role of Critical Journalism in Democratic Governance in Nigeria

In all ramifications, critical journalism goes beyond a mere reporting of information of recent significant event to the in depth interpretation and analysis of the event so reported. This gives room for an enhanced performance of

the perfunctory functions of journalism in all angles of human life and all facets of the society. Critical journalism is issue-based journalism. It is instructive to note that critical journalism is not an abstract concept or a practice in isolation. It is rather founded on the basic tenets and ingredients of the conventional journalism, only that it goes beyond the basics to advanced thematic issues in journalism. The major roles of critical journalism in democratic governance are amplified as followed.

(i) Checkmating Excesses in Governance: Critical journalism brings about investigative political reporting. This results in a system of checks and balances which is one of the basic ingredients of good governance and sustenance of democracy. Investigative political reporting affords the media the opportunity to convene an open forum for legitimate interest groups to contribute to governance (DeBurgh, 2008).

(ii) Watchdog over Governance: The word, watchdog, describes the watchful and critical role of journalism against bad practices of the government and private individuals that can hinder democratic governance. Critical journalism is ideally a watchdog on the government through the digging up of information about the political process, interpreting and analysing same as well as alerting the public of the probable implication. In doing so, the media push the government on the path of accountability and help in developing the country through democratic governance.

(iii) Disseminating Policy information: One of the major duties of the media is to educate the populace on policies of government. The pros and cons of such policy information are disseminated alongside the interpretation of the reality of the policy framework. This function is usually achieved through critical journalism.

(iv) Electioneering Role: The mass media play fundamental role in the electoral process of any country. By their agenda setting role the mass media help the Nigerian electorate to have an insight into the personalities of the political office seekers and their manifestoes. This role is mainly actualised through critical journalism, which in the long run plays an important part in shaping political reality of the nation. The mass media inversely determine the most important issue; the media may indirectly set the agenda of the campaign based on what filters through the media to the politicians. It is true that, through critical journalism, the mass media also set the issue, the agenda for the campaign and the agenda dictate the issues on which many people ultimately base their voting decisions (Adam and Clarke, 2006).

During the transition from military rule (in 1998) to democratic governance (in 1999), critical journalism lived up to expectation of keeping the public abreast of happenings in Nigeria's political space. This accounts for the reason why *Tell Magazine* carried a weekly count down to the handing over in every issue of its publication between July 1998 and May 1999 to reflect the transition programme (Adetunde, 2001). Besides, the *Nigeria Decides* - a political debate programme on the 2007 general elections produced by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), *Focus Nigeria, the Political Platform* a political programme on African Independent Television (AIT) and other media contents helped in political socialisation and participation in electoral process. Again, shortly before elections and immediately after elections in 2015, the media, through critical journalism, offered useful analyses that gave people some insight into election process as well as helped people to reach rational discernment on matters relating to the elections. For instance, immediately after the presidential election, which was tension-filled, person got so close to the media for the authentic results of the election. These all underscore the significance of critical journalism in democratic governance in Nigeria.

(v) Sustenance of Democratic Governance: The current democratic governance in Nigeria is expected to be sustained to a point that it guarantees peace, prosperity and sense of justice and equity to every citizen. To this end, all the stake holders have their individual as well as collective roles to play. The mass media, cum critical journalism, are indispensable in this regard. As part of the social structures operating within some economic and political parameters in the society, the mass media facilitate and strengthen democratic governance through unbiased interpretation and analysis of information of political significance to the public. With this, the behaviour, performance and even the interest of the media in democratic governance is apt and is clearly appreciated.

It is obvious that there are specific responsibilities that are most appropriately discharged by the media by consolidating democratic governance in Nigeria. Certainly, the media institution widens the frontiers of the public sphere to good governance and development. It does this by criticising and questioning the legitimacy as well as the operations of stakeholders in democratic governance. In actual fact, the involvement of the media in governance imposes some sort of responsibility on the media. The media responsibility is the answerability of the media to the various constituencies that depend on the media for information, education and direction on the functioning of the system. In other words, media responsibility attends to the issues of the extent to which the various sections of the media sufficiently answer the queries on ethics, professionalism as well as progress in the challenge of democracy based on the role of the media as watchdogs in the society.

(vi) Imputation of legitimacy: The media sometimes stamp some element of legitimacy on democratic governance and processes in Nigeria. This could be by publishing justifying information on the actions or inactions that are positive or supportive to the nation's democracy. For instance, the media sometimes engage the parties to democratic governance on the extent to which they abide with spirit and precepts of democracy in their

various affairs and characteristics. This is mainly applicable when the journalists understand the trend and interpret same to the public and show rationale for such trends.

6. Challenges of Critical Journalism in Nigerian Democracy

The Nigerian socio-economic system has some negative implications for the practice of critical journalism in the country. Critical journalism in Nigeria is bedevilled by various factors and issues, among them are:

(i) Poor or outright absence of Remuneration: Journalists in Nigeria, like in most other developing democracies, are among the least paid or motivated in the whole world. They are poorly equipped for the task of critical journalism practice. Nigerian journalists are yet among the most hard working and risk blazers in the world. In some media establishments in Nigeria, especially the privately owned newspapers, journalists are owed salaries for months, yet such journalists are expected to expose corruption in the society.

Again, some newspaper organisations only “employ” journalists, issue them staff identity card and ask them to earn their income through practice without any salary from the organisation. This directly hampers critical journalism. It renders journalists as beggars and income seekers with less attention to professionalism, ethics and critical journalism. Thus the integrity needed in the objective analysis in journalism becomes easily compromised.

(ii) Media Ownership: The economy, management and operation of most of the government owned media in Nigeria are controlled by the government. This has serious consequences on the ability of the media to carry out their functions in a credible manner. The medium owned and run by the government cannot play the watchdog role. On the other hand, most of the privately owned establishments rely largely on government support and patronage thereby relaxing the steam of critical journalism in the long run.

(iii) Government Harassment and Lack of Press Freedom: Another teething problem facing journalism in Nigeria and other developing democracies is the issue of incessant harassment by the authorities or agents of government via arrest, closure of offices, seizure of newspapers, illegal detentions, obnoxious press laws and other subtle means of subjugation. The ultimate effect is that the media sometimes lack the independence and confidence to ask the right questions and bring the government to account by exposing corruption and other activities that are detrimental to democratic governance.

7. Conclusion/Recommendations

The media institution is too critical to be ignored or relegated to the background in the current democratic governance in Nigeria. In fact, it is a trite fact that the quality and nature of freedom in a nation’s media speaks volumes about the quality of the nation’s democracy. Critical journalism has an important role in advancing a pro-poor development agenda as well as supporting economic growth and sustaining democracy. This is mainly possible where the media effectively fulfil their roles of watchdog, gate keeper and agenda setter. Critical journalism thus improves governance by engendering citizens’ awareness on social issues, enabling citizens to hold the government accountable to its actions thereby curbing corruption and creating a civil forum for debate.

By and large, despite the problems and challenges facing the Nigerian media, critical journalism greatly contributes to enhanced democratic governance in Nigeria. For the greater attainment of the roles of critical journalism in democratic governance, the following recommendations become necessary:

(i) Journalists should practise based on the principles of social responsibility, objectivity, fairness, balance in handling of political coverage etc.

(ii) Critical journalists should always place high premium on values such as credibility and integrity over monetary and other forms of gratifications.

(iii) Journalists should work towards changing the mindset of the political class and the general public on negative attitudes like money politics, political vandalism and rascality.

(iv) Journalists should strive to go beyond merely reporting based on the 5W1H approach, but engage in in-depth investigation, interpretation and unbiased analysis to upgrade the standard of conventional journalism to critical journalism.

(v) Media organisations should pay increased attention to updating their equipment, working environment as well as welfare issues of journalists under their employ.

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