

Police-Public Media Relations: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Police-Public relations is the subject of Police-Media Relations. The Police and the media are two institutions that are aimed at ensuring that the society lives well based on lawful and orderly conduct in the interest of justice, fairness and development of the society. The two institutions require information from the public to perform their duties prudently and diligently. However, they differ in orientation, operational techniques, platforms and public perception. A typical scenario for instance, if there is an uprising, attack, disaster or any such unfortunate occurrence, members of the public will be running to safer areas. It is common see the Police and the media are pushing their way forward into that 'danger zone' to perform their individual responsibilities. Both the Police and the media depend on sources for information to facilitate their work, though they differ significantly in approaching the subject matter; thus the Police interrogate to get information, the journalist on the otherhand, interviews to secure information. It is undeniable fact that, the two institutions require each other in the performance of their responsibilities and therefore need to develop a harmonious and cordial relations. One fact is that the Police have bags of information that the media require, likewise, the Police require the visibility and bridge that the media provide to link them with the society in a positive manner in order to have a goodwill from the public. Daily, the media reports on issues pertaining crime or about the Police, the crime news and other sensational events excite the public and it enables them to appreciate the effort of the government or that of the Police on crime prevention and control. These inevitably indicates that the media and the police must work together. However, over the years there exists a mixed relation between them, this paper identifies those challenges affecting the duo relations and recommends ways to overcome those challenges.

Keywords: Police; Media and public relations challenges.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Peace, stability and orderliness are fundamental requirements for the optimal functioning of the human society. The alternative to peace and orderliness is anarchy, instability and chaos; basic elements that undermine progress, development and peaceful coexistence of the various components of the society. In the histories of societies, several mechanisms have been developed by the leadership and followship to safeguard, protect and defend the citizens and their individual collective interests. In fact, every era had its own unique system of protecting its citizens from deviants and criminally minded elements. In the words of Alemika (2004), the necessity of policing "becomes even more evident in modern societies characterised by diversities and contradictions arising from population heterogeneity, urbanization, industrialization, conflicting ideologies on appropriate socio-political and economic form of organization".

The rapid growth and development of crime across the country has generated feelings among the media and the public as to whether the police are doing their duty for protecting life and property. Odekunle (1977:7) observed that:

The value and worth of a police force are best determined by the amount and quality of protection it offers the people, and also by the degree of confidence and level of cooperation it enjoys from the average Nigerian citizens. The police falls far short of the optimum standard in these two functions.

With increased development and sophistication of societies, there arose the challenge of securing lives and property in such settings. Hence, the development of newer, effective and multiple mechanisms, strategies and approaches to securing and safeguarding the peaceful and orderly conduct of societies. One of such mechanisms is the police institution. The police, in whatever way they are defined or which ever name they bear are essentially known for safeguarding, maintaining and advancing the safety and security of lives and property of the people. The police do not serve an individual perse; they serve the collective interest of the public and the state. In the course of duty, the police interact with every strata of the society and are continuously exposed to all aspects of behaviour, both positive and negative as manifested by individuals who constitute the general public.

Thus, in this paper, we shall focus on the nature of the leadership and the challenges involved in Police, public and media relations in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper will dwell on the relationship between the Police and the general public and that of the Police and the media. It will also explore into the challenges that arise from such interactions.

1.1.2 The Police

The Nigerian Police occupies a very important space in the sustenance of an orderly and peaceful society. The Police represent the institution that is principally known as the enforcer of law and order, protector of the people, detector of crime and criminal tendencies, and the agency responsible for apprehending offenders. Of course, there are similar agencies that are involved in the business of security in the country. For instance, there is the SSS, customs, immigration, NCDS, etc. But none of those other agencies is prominently regarded in policing like the Police Force. Stated differently, if it is not the Police, it cannot be the Police.

From the colonial Hausa Glovers period to date, the role of the Nigeria Police has been quite reflective of the political, economic and social developments in the country. In other words, the character, roles and priorities of the Police in the country are principally determined by the changing nature of the political and economic structures of the country at different times. For instance, in contemporary times, the Nigerian Police could be said to derive their operational powers from three major sources. These sources are: Constitutional, structural and psychological. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution in Section 214 and the Police Act in Chapter 359 of the Laws of the Nigeria, 1990, had assigned the Police the following major responsibilities:

- a. Prevention and detection of crime;
- b. Apprehension of offenders;
- c. Preservation of life and property;
- d. Due enforcement of all laws and regulations; and
- e. Any such military duties within or without Nigeria as may be required.

As at January, 2006, the Nigerian Police Force had 310,000 personnel serving in different parts of the country (Bozimo, 2006). From that time to date, the number of the personnel have significantly increased considering the continuous recruitment exercises undertaken by the Force in recent times. But even with that, the Force is seen as understaffed, under equipped and under funded to be able to effectively police the country of over 140 Million people with extensive borders, varying complexities, debilitating poverty, competing demands and a predominantly younger population. Indeed, the challenges are enormous for the Force.

By the nature of their mandate, the Police “have the statutory powers to investigate crimes, to interrogate and prosecute suspects, to grant bail to suspects pending completion of investigations or prior to court arraignment, to serve summons, and to regulate or disperse processions and assemblies”. Police are also empowered to seize and search properties suspected to be stolen or associated with crime and to take and record for purpose of identification (Alemika, 2004). In the process of carrying out their responsibilities, officers and men of the Police Force are bound to be popular as well as unpopular in the society. While they are good guys to a victim of a crime, they would conversely remain enemies to the criminal. Such is the world of the Police. They are trained to serve and keep the society safe.

Thus, the way the Police relate and interact with the general public is defined by the dynamics and emerging challenges in the country. Little wonder that it is often said that every society gets the Police institution that it deserves. By implication, the Nigeria of today has the Police that it deserves; so if the society is good, the Police is good, likewise if the society is bad, the Police is bad.

1.1.3 POLICE –PUBLIC –MEDIA RELATIONS

By the nature of their operations, the Police are justifiably visible, meaning that they are every where at all times. They interact with the people at all levels in the society. This is why, as indicated earlier they are loved and hated depending on circumstances. In fact, the Police are commonly described as “friends to all” or as the saying goes in Hausa, *‘Dansanda Abokin Kowa’*. Without doubt, the public in the environment or the presence of a check point should provide a sense of security to the ordinary citizens. Unlike the other security outfits, the Police are supposed to be the closest and perhaps, the most trusted ally to the ordinary citizens. And because of the frequency of interaction between the two sides and the insistence of the Police in the enforcement of the rule of law of public safety, the Police and the Public are bound to experience occasional turbulence in their relationships.

Closely related to Police-Public relations is the subject of Police-Media Relations. The Police and the media are two institutions that are aimed at ensuring that the society lives well based on lawful and orderly conduct in the interest of justice, fairness and development. They all require information from the public to perform their duties. But they differ in orientation, operational techniques, platforms and public perception. For instance, if there is an uprising, disaster, an attack or any such unfortunate occurrence, you may notice members of the public in such a setting running out to safety. At the same time, you may notice members of the public in such a setting running out to safety. At the same time, you may notice the Police and the media pushing their way into that ‘danger zone’ to perform their individual responsibilities. Similarly, both the Police and the media depend on sources for information in their work even though they differ in approach; thus while the Police interrogate, the journalist interviews to secure information.

Equally, the two institutions require each other in the performance of their responsibilities. The Police have bags of information that the media require, likewise, the Police require the visibility and bridge that the

media provide to link them with the society, particularly in a positive manner. Daily, if one reads our newspaper/magazines or tune to the radio or watch TV, he/she is provided with one or more stories about the Police, crime news and other sensational events that excite the public.

But there is always a snag in the Police-media relations. While the Police tend to be extra careful with information believing that every piece be useful for further investigations, the journalist on the other hand is always in a hurry to obtain information and disseminate same. And, because they are trained to be ever suspicious, hardly do the Police trust the media with information, suspecting as usual that, releasing of information immaturity could jeopardize their investigations.

The Police also occasionally blame the media for misrepresenting their activities; often, even if unintentionally, giving undue publicity to suspected criminals and their activities; and for being impatient with the slow wheel of investigations. On their part, the media feel that the Police are too secretive, uncooperative, highly centralized and insensitive about datelines in the media.

At any rate, irrespective of the above views, the Police and the media are partners in progress who ought to maintain a balanced relationship based on mutual respect and understanding of each other's operational framework for the over all interest of the immediate community and the nation.

2.1.1. PUBLIC-MEDIA PERCEPTION OF THE POLICE

As indicated earlier, the Nigeria Police is the most visible security outfit in the country. The media always feature them; the people always talk about them; the government is always referring to them; in fact stories about the Police bother from the serious, truthful to that of the ridiculous and stupid. You hear stories of bravery as well as jokes of cowardice and the absurd about the Police. In summary, it is a mixed bag. Unfortunately, however, a study in 2000 found that a significant proportion of stories about the police in the public domain is negative. Alemika and Chukwuma (2000) discovered that highly educated persons were less likely to report arrest by the police. Commercial drivers reported the highest level of arrest, detention and brutality. More than two-thirds of the respondents have ever observed the police receiving bribe, abusing, beating and kicking citizens (Alemika and Chukwuma,2000). Police officers in the study corroborated the public response as 43% of them admitted to have ever insulted, beaten and slapped citizens. Study by Folashade (1999) in Kwara revealed that majority (55%) of the public have no faith in police protection. It is the loss of public faith in the police, amidst the desire to protect life and property, that various communities across the country evolved alternative ways of protecting themselves. Obiako (2000) posited that the Nigerian police force does not have a good public image.

Now, we may wish to ask: What is the perception of the Police by the generality of people and specifically the media? Though, I did not conduct a systematic study to arrive at definite conclusions, below are some of the points I gathered from the literature and based on street observations:

- **Police Brutality:** Police brutality is a common issue that the public worry about in their relationship with the Police. There are numerous allegations of extra-judicial killings, excessive brutalities in dealing with suspects, intimidation, harassment, etc. Stories of accidental discharge, kicking and beating of citizens, arbitrary detentions, etc are commonly associated with the Police. Equally, they are often accused of blind support for brutal leaders and their policies at the various levels of governments.
- **Corruption and Extortion:** Corruption is a disease that has permeated the entire fabric of the Nigerian society. Hardly can one mention any sector in the country that the virus of corruption has not affected. It comes in different forms, shapes and ramifications. But perhaps, because of the public trust in the police and the belief that one of the major duties of the police is to investigate cases of corruption and corrupt activities; the dust is often raised when it involves the police. They expect the police to live above board to be able to investigate corruption in the society. There is a notion that the involvement of the Police in corruption undermines their moral authority and basis for fairness in dealing with conflicting parties and handling offenders of the law.

Alemika (1999:10) argues that: Police corruption elicit serious concern for three significant reasons. First, the Police are expected to be moral as well as law enforcement agents. If the Police which are employed to prevent and detect Corruption, and bring culprits to judgment are themselves strikingly corrupt, the society's crusade against corruption is guaranteed to fail. Second, the Police exercise powers that have profound implications for the life, property, safety and freedoms of citizens. Where the exercise of such powers is contaminated by corrupt motives, the citizens feel exceedingly vulnerable, insecure and powerless. Third, police corruption is often tantamount to extortion, a form of robbery or demand with force. These dimensions of Police corruption explain why the public is threatened by such practices... the most significant source of police brutality. In many circumstances, police brutality is a means of coercing individuals to succumb to demands for bribes, and at some other time, it is punishment for not cooperating with the police in their demand for gratification (Alemika 1999:10).

The issue of extortion is also commonly associated with the Police. In the past, commercial drivers, in

particular, have interesting accounts on how they drop the popular N20 note at check points, when they existed.

Resource and Management inadequacies: The general public sympathizes with the Nigeria Police on the glaring difficulties bothering on deficiencies that undermine their efficiency. Some of these relate to:

- Inadequate manpower
- Inadequate funding
- Poor remunerations
- Poor crime and information management system
- Inadequate offices and residential accommodation
- Unhygienic surroundings
- Internal corruption
- The system can sometimes frustrate the efforts of individual officers.

2.1.2 PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS OF THE POLICE

The refusal by the public to cooperate with the police is the dissatisfaction with police performance and suspicion that police are accomplices in crime and would reveal information given to them by the public to criminals. Despite these, the public expectations of the police is stated below.

- The public and the media expect to have a fearless, accommodating and efficient police. Nigerians desire to have a Police that they trust and relate with. The Police should connote safety, security and dependability.
- The public desires to be of help to the police, but individuals often fear the consequences of Police bureaucracy which lead to unpleasant experiences.
- The public expect to have a Police that correlate well with the judiciary and other agencies for faster delivery of justice.
- Increased capacity of the Police to utilize Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism (ADR) in settling disputes and conflicts among members of the public.

3.1.1. IMPROVING POLICE MEDIA RELATIONS

Just like the Police, the media have the constitutional and professional role of keeping the society sufficiently and correctly informed about happenings in the environment. The media also highlights to the society threats that are likely to injure it. It is clear, therefore, that the media need the Police as a major source of information.

In most media houses, there are Police and crime desks. Such desk officers are expected to relate well with the Police structure for regular and authoritative information on the beat. This is why media are always encouraged to have a good knowledge of the police and its operational mechanisms.

On the other hand, the Police are always encouraged to utilize available avenues in the media to publicize their activities and equip the public with useful information on security issues. Equally, the police may obtain good leads or clues on some happenings through the media. Thus, the two institutions need to trust each other and specifically, the Police should occasionally allow the press access to some action stories. Denial of information by the Police may fuel rumours. This is why the various Police Commands are encouraged to designate only articulate, level headed and extroverted officers as PPROs to be able to relate well with the media and enjoy their confidence.

3.1.2. IMPROVING POLICE-PUBLIC RELATIONS

There is need for a positive relationship based on mutual respect, understanding, trust and support between the Police and the various segments of the population. Without the public, the Police will have no work to do; equally, a society without the Police can only be imagined than desired. Likewise, if the environment is hostile, it will be difficult and risky for the Police to perform. Thus, the Police and the different segments in the Nigerian nation have to continue working towards facilitating positive interactions that secure the public and optimize the performance of the Police. Some of the strategies for doing this may include:

- Reactivating and strengthening Police-community relations
- Deliberate policy of engaging the local communities in the security arrangements.
- Regular holding of open, Police – public forum
- Greater respect for people's human rights by the Police
- More civility on the side of the Police, especially from the lower ranks
- Recruitment of officers and men of the Police from all communities in line with the Federal character principle.
- Greater openness by the police for the public to understand them

Recommendations

- Government as the employer of the Police on behalf of the citizens should strengthen its support in terms of increased funding, recruitment, welfare services, equipment and general improvement in the

working environment to have an active, authoritative and alert police. A contented and satisfied Police Officer is most likely going to relate well with the public than a deprived, frustrated and poorly equipped officer. Equally, a satisfied and assured rank and file of the force is most likely going to behave professionally at all times.

- As the society becomes increasingly sophisticated, Nigeria must revolutionize its Police force to be able to respond to the emerging challenges and newer forms of crime. In other words, we cannot have a 1960 police to address the challenges of 2007 in the country. Therefore, the quality of officers, their training, remuneration, equipping, etc must be in tune with the changing times.
- Increased media engagement at all levels. One strategy would be to replicate the current Police Diary programme sponsored by the PEF and aired on the FRCN Network twice weekly. State commands may strengthen their community relations by introducing such avenues on the local broadcast stations to communicate with their immediate publics, probably in the local languages.
- Improved the community and public relations capacities of the police through continuous training in and out of the various training colleges.
- Strengthen the ADR mechanism among the Police.
- Increased involvement of police officers in community activities.
- The media should understand the police very well and accord the officers the attention they deserve especially when they perform some spectacular assignment that needed to be acknowledged by the society.

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Brief About the Authors

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