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Investigative Journalism in Nigeria: The Press and Responsible Governance

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Abstract:

For about 50 years now—with a modest reference to the independence era—Nigeria has been struggling to deal with many social, political, and economic problems. On several occasions, the Nigerian presses have been called in to fulfil social obligations, help promote good governance and protect democracy. During the era of unfortunate military junta for instance, the mass media were on hand to challenge the aberration. The press also helped in truncating President Obasanjo’s third term bid. Currently, the media have an eye on all tiers of governance. The press monitor the activities of the Bureau for Public Enterprise as it conducts bids for sale, etc. In recent time, the press have monitored activities of NNPC and major oil players and gave adequate coverage to subsidy probe. This paper x-rays how the press have combined social responsibility with other economic and political interests in Nigeria. The paper made recommendation for continued responsible press.

Keywords: Press, Mass media, Democracy, Rights, Democratic Governance, Political Advertiser, Social Responsibility

1. Introduction

The 21st century continues to offer Nigeria substantial challenges in the management of social and other development problems. For about 50 years now—with a modest reference to the independence era—Nigeria has been struggling to deal with many social, political and economic problems. On several occasions, the Nigerian mass media have been called in to fulfil social obligations. During the unfortunate military juntas for instance, the mass media were on hand to challenge the aberration.

The world over, the press’ primary responsibility is to have an eye on the government. In the United States for instance, there is evidence of media approval of Barack Obama’s first 100 days in office. The ABC, CBS and NBC’s coverage of Obama’ first 100 days finds the networks lavished good press on every major initiative of the every major initiative of the Obama administration, including the massive stimulus package, all of the various bailouts, health care, stem cells, the environment and foreign policy (<http://mrc.org> retrieved 22-07-09). The American yyyuui press has an elastic tendency to give a pass mark and revert at a slightest goof. In the past, the American media have flogged American leaders for misbehavior, as in the case of the Vietnam War (1966-1976); the Water Gate Scandal (1972-1974); and the Bill Clinton massive media trial. This situation reflects part of the fundamental functions of the press—their ability to constitute checks and balances so that democracy could thrive.

Taking a cue from the above situation, the press in Nigeria has been part of the democratic process. As an ally of democracy, or as a foe, the Nigerian presses have over the decades evolved into the big. On rare occasions, the press have helped complicate the democratic process, as in the times when they maintained partisanship instead of pursuing the truth on the basis of which a guilty verdict is passable. However, for about 50 years now—with a modest reference to the independence era—Nigeria has been struggling to deal with many social, political, and economic problems. On several occasions, the Nigerian press have been called in to fulfil social obligations—to help promote good governance, and protect democracy. During the era of unfortunate Nigerian militocracy for instance, the mass media were on hand to challenge the aberration. The press also helped in truncating the Obasanjo’s third term bid. Currently, the media have an eye on all tiers of governance, especially the National Assembly. The press monitored the activities of the Bureau for Public Enterprise as it conducts bids for sale. Currently, the press keeps a close eye the subsidy saga, rot in NNPC, as well as how government is handling the Boko Haram menace.

The government of Umaru Musa Ya’Ardua came on board in 2007. His election was believed to have been characterised by some irregularities even though he was declared winner. The mass media, which initially were sceptical about the outcome of Yaradua’s four-year-tenure kept an eye on the administration until he lost his life. When President Ya’Aradua’s died in office, the press was in support of President Jonathan ascension to power but have also kept a close watch over the presidency in recent times. This is particularly in view persisting alleged waste in governance in the midst of harrowing times for Nigerians. How did a nation once adjudged the happiest people in the world become so unhopeful? In view of the relentlessness of the social responsibility theory, there is the need to ask questions about how well the journalists performed in recent years.

1.1. *The Press and Investigative Journalism*

Investigative journalism is a core ingredient of modern day journalism and indispensable in any modern democracy. Journalists investigate wars, police brutality, Niger-Delta restiveness, tax evasion, political activities, disasters, frauds of Nigerian variants (e.g. Gen Chris Alli alleged financial profligacy. Alli was alleged to have spent over three billion Naira in four months and Olabode George, former Nigerian Ports Chairman, alleged to have misappropriated over 84 billion naira). Journalists investigate unfathomable falling standards of living and enigmatic unabated inflations, and so on. Journalists also investigate government activities like the handover of the BAKASSI peninsula to Cameroon, on 14-08-08.

In a way, all stories are investigative stories, and many scholars agree to that. Itule and Anderson (2003, p.358) state they are so because they “require research, digging, interviewing and writing. Also all reporters are investigators who are trained to ask questions, uncover information, and write the most complete stories possible. The writers, however, provide a distinction:

Some reporters, however, concentrate solely on investigations of wrong doing. They deal with reporter- adversary relationships that are usually not found in beat reporting or other in-depth coverage. These reporters are trying to ferret out well-guarded information from often-hostile sources (Itule and Anderson, 2003, p.357).

If a journalist has a primary duty to seek hidden facts, certainly, the journalist is of an investigating stock. The investigative journalist is a lid blower, who opens up a can of worms to the despair of the authorities. MacDougall (1977, p. 189) reported an AP staff idea about investigative reporting:

Our assignment is to dig out, one way or another, the wealth of important, significant information that readers must have if they are to comprehend the incredible complexity that is the federal government. What we are talking about, investigative reporting, is both the basis and the only justification for the constitutional guarantee of the press.

Much of the information needed to keep the media going does not come that easy. The investigative reporter is a “lid blower”. He opens up the can of worms to the despair of the authorities. This is the kind of reporting that pushes the reporter to make open that which the government wants to keep secret. It can cost the journalist his life because what the journalist wants to make open can mess up an irresponsible government. An aspect of investigative reporting is exemplified in undercover journalism. This is because it is sometimes easier to investigate a situation as an insider. MacDougall (1977, p.189) reports an AP-staff idea about investigative reporting:

Our assignment is to dig out, one way or another, the wealth of important, significant information that readers must have if they are to comprehend the incredible complexity that is the federal government... what we're talking about, investigative reporting, is both the basis and the only justification for the constitutional guarantee for a free press.

The world over, media are known, depending on the situation, to be both government advocates and adversaries. In support of the World War II for instance, Hollywood was hailed to be a “good citizen” by producing films that justified America in the war. But that was not the case with the Vietnam War (1966-1976) and the Watergate scandal (1972-1974) “when journalists saw themselves as ‘watchdogs’ instead of ‘lapdogs’ who uncritically gobbled up news handouts” (Straubhaar & LaRose, 2004.p.101). In fact, a popular notion about the press in a flourishing democracy is that of an adversarial relationship between it and the government.

The mass media's fundamental function of fighting corruption especially in high places, criticising government officials, and providing adequate information so that people can reason, distinguish one media from the other. To a large extent, investigative reporters attempt to uncover information that governments, cartels, business moguls, corporations and apparatchiks want to conceal. Such issues often lead to scandals as in the case of Watergate scandal.

Too often, these critical exposures placed newspapers in conflict with the values of other stakeholders, especially government officials. Little wonder then that a stage of investigative reporting was described as muckraking journalism by Teddy Roosevelt. That metaphor was later adopted by critics who felt magazines, the protagonist of investigative reporting at that time in the United States, have gone too far. But then, these muckraking articles were producing results. Rodman (2002, p.119) stated: “Muckraking articles helped lead to child labour laws, workers compensation laws, and the first congressional investigations into business practices.” According to Nwabueze (2005, p.10), when a discussion in journalism is on the issue of going extra mile to present the behind-the-scene-intrigue in an event, (e.g. the Watergate scandal), burrowing into hidden facts, and unearthing what may not have been imagined on the face value of story, what is being talked about is investigative reporting. He continued:

The story being investigated may have been over-flogged in daily newspapers. But an investigative reporter makes it look fresh in the eyes of the audience by adopting a detective approach in discovering something that was hitherto unknown about and presenting or re-angling the report from a seemingly fresh perspective.

Other scholars have provided an idea about investigative reporting: At its best, investigative reporters is master detective, a situation reporting rather than event-reporting (Kamath, 1980, P. 156); The more you look the more you see reporting or behind-the-scene-intrigue reporting (Nwabueze, 2005, pp. 10 -12); lid blower journalism (Uwakwe, 2005, p.96); information about how money and power is used (Levin, 2000, p.82). In fact, this can be described as the eye can see journalism.

1.2. *Investigative Journalism in Nigeria*

In the later days of government of Olusegun Obasanjo, the press exposed many alleged and substantiated fraudulent practices in the political realm. Some of the celebrated cases involved Alamiyieseiha Diepreye, Ayodele Fayose and Joshua Dariye. In 2008, journalists were querying the supply of substandard vehicles to the national assembly. The Channels TV was on hand to celebrate this issue in the public arena. Over the years, the Nigerian press have demonstrated evidences of social responsibility as accounted by Okeke (2007, pp.117-18):

- The 21st edition of The Economist of 1996 gave the gravity of corruption in Nigeria as 10% of the G.D.P
- The news August-2nd, 1999 exposed Alhaji Salisu Buhari, former speaker, House of Representatives, for false declaration of age and qualifications. Salisu was eventually tried and convicted of forgery and perjury on August 3, 1999, by an Abuja Chief Magistrate court (Tell June 19, 2001, p. 19)
- Tell May 22, 2000 reported the scandalous action of Senate President, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo, an action that led to his removal.
- Tell May 7, 2001 stated, 'From Evans Enwerem to Chuba Okadigbo and now to Anyim Pius Anyim: The upper legislature House has become a laughing stock of over allegations of impropriety.'
- The News June 4, 2001 reported that three governors were stinking in corruption – one from the South West who bought a house in Florida in the United States of America, the other, from the East of the Niger, who had over and 100 million in his personal account.
- Tell magazine, November 20, 2001, reported that bribes were offered to some members of the house of representative to quicken the process of removing the speaker Umar Ghali Na'Abba. The report fingered Obasanjo and Governor Peter Odili as the sponsors.

Other evidences of the upright performances of the press are documented:

- Tell magazine, July 6, 2009. investigated the allegations that the Chief Whip , Emeka Ihedioha misappropriated 150 million meant to fete former leaders of the House of Representatives during the celebration of 10 years of uninterrupted democracy in Nigeria.
- Insider Weekly, July 6, 2009 investigated the allegations that about 250 million leaves Awka the capital of Anambra State for Governor Peter Obi's private business premises in Apapa Lagos every last Sunday of every month. The magazine also investigated the 250 million naira cash payment to a contractor to purchase cars for the State Government.
- Source, July 6, 2009 investigated an Edo State law maker who allegedly collected 8.5 million naira from a Nigerian Gas company.
- Tribune, July 10, 2009 reported governors (Bode George, Orji Uzor-Kalu, Ladoja) and others alleged to have carted away 52 billion naira.
- Tell October 5, 2009 p.16 had a caption: "Nigeria: The Making of a failed State." The publication asserted that Nigeria's global status was fast diminishing and may gradually become a failed state.
- Tell November 7, 2011 had a caption: Wasteful Government: "Time for Responsibility." The publication regrets that the average lawmaker in the National Assembly took home 186 million naira excluding severance allowance, more than the president who took one million a month. The figures were considered outrageous compared to the 18,000 minimum wage for workers. According to the magazine, elected politicians waste resources on hiring jets for travel within and outside the country, enjoying obscene estacodes and allowances in the process while governors and even councillors, local government chairmen and their spouses, roam about in convoys of state of the art cars, all in the name of service to the people. In saner lands, however, political office holders board commercial planes and stay in economy class to save costs (Tell November 7, 2011, p.17)
- Tell January 16, 2012 has a caption: "Were the poor really benefiting from petroleum subsidy." In its story, the magazine recounts the profligacy in governance in the mist of removal of oil subsidy. The magazine was worried that in Nigeria, a senator earns 245 million naira per annum, representing that salaries of about 25 vice chancellors or 50 medical doctors, 60 directors in public service or 500 school teachers. This in a country parading 10 percent of world maternal and child mortality and 10 percent of children out of school. In the presidency, US president has two aircrafts, but Nigeria's has six and has voted 300 million to buy two more. The British Prime Minister has two official cars while his counterpart in Nigeria has 23 (Tell January 16, 2012 pp 52-56).
- Tell, October 28, 2013, p.36 had caption "Angst over Ministerial Car". The magazine stated: "With aviation agencies claiming to be under financial burden, which has impaired their regulatory functions, Nigerians weer shocked last week that the NCAA recently splashed 255 million naira on two exotic cars for the Minister of aviation". That publication was a major precursor to the removal of Stella Oduah as Minister.
- Tell February, 24, 2014, p.24 had a title, "A Nation Going Mental over Corruption". The magazine chronicled bribery allegation against some legislators. In one of the paragraphs, the ruling PDP was alleged to have wood defecting members back with millions of dollars.
- Early in 2014, the erstwhile Central Governor of Nigeria, Sanusi Lamido blew a whistle that a staggering 20 billion dollars was not remitted into the Federation Account by the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation. This attracted wide Senate and media probe as reported in one of the editions of Tell titled "Playing politics with Diezani Scandal" (Tell, April 18, 2014, p. 29).
- Tell, May 12, 2014 had a caption: "History May be Unkind to You". The publication had a piece by Dele Ajaja. The piece chided President Jonathan for failure in providing inspirational leadership. It regretted that the President oversaw the "expansion of open sea of corruption in Nigeria for slipshod public officials to swim inside" (Tell, May 12, 2014, p.44).

The preceding documentation has been to show that the Nigeria press have been part of development process in Nigeria. In a way, we can conclude that the press have done well and has continued to frown at mal governance. The press have kept watch on the activities of politicians especially as regards transparency in governance. In many instances as we have earlier documented, the press have

frowned at corrupt practices in governance. To portray the graveness of high-scale government indiscipline in Nigeria, Nigerian journalists began to affix “gate”, derived from the grievous Watergate scandal to attack corruption in high places. Evidences: the certificate forgery of former Speaker, Alhaji Salisu Buhari (Buharigate), the alleged certificate forgery of Governor Bola Tinubu (Tinubu gate), the misappropriation of funds by former Speaker, Patricia Etteh (Ettehgate), and so on. Even though Nigerian journalists usually apply this term mostly to serving government officials, in time, you may hear of “Olabodegate”, Ribadugate”, “Adeleyegate”, or use something similar and capable of making someone raise eyebrows. And these scandals sell newspapers. It is on this basis that critics argue that newspapers and magazines having understood that such scandalous stories sell newspaper that American journalists engaged in “scandal mongering and public voyeurism” (Straubhaar and LaRose, 2004, p. 102). In view of the January 2012 unexplained disappearance of almost Nigeria’s most wanted man, Kabiru Sokoto arrested in connection with masterminding the Christmas day bombing connected to Boko Haram, President Jonathan sacked senior police officers. Thus in time, we hear of “Ringim gate” to describe the role of the former Inspector General. Concerning the most celebrated legislative probe in Nigeria history, the subsidy probe, we all also in time read from the press, “NNPC gate” or something close to that.

2. Conclusion

The social responsibility theory has helped us gain perspective on some standards for media performance. In fact a significant response to the failings of the both Nigerian politicians and their military counterpart has been the development of a vibrant press. In a way then, the mass media have helped restore denigrated hopes in Nigeria. Even though the evolution of the Nigerian mass press has followed and reflected a political and ethnic pattern, the press have done much in protecting democracy and promoting good governance. Evidences: the press was on the vanguard against military rule in Nigeria; it has exposed corruption in political circles and has continued to investigate the legislature. These are in addition to many other areas where the press have weighed reasonably on the scale. An aspect of the theory is that the media must operate within the confines of all social standards and expectations.

3. Recommendation

McQuail, (2005, p. 172) states that “the media have obligations to the society, and media ownership is a public trust. In this regard, we state that the Nigerian press should continue to be responsive and accountable to the public as politicians and political apparatchiks continue to devise measures of failing in their responsibilities. Nigerians were once adjudged the happiest people in the world. If the press consolidates and improves on its functions, Nigerians may continue to look hopefully into the future. Indeed, this social responsibility should not be shirked by journalists.

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