

THE PROPOSED JOURNALISM ENHANCEMENT BILL AND CHALLENGES OF JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

There are numerous challenges bedeviling journalism practice in Nigeria and this is why many have faulted the profession on especially, ethics and professionalism, corruption, gap between theory and practice as well as ownership and control of the media, poor remuneration and especially the lack of a unified standard of operation among other things. The tasks schedule for the journalists is huge and enormous' as provided by the Nigerian Constitution and the code of ethical conduct of the profession. This paper discusses the relationship the proposed Journalism Enhancement Bill and how it could address the challenges of standard operations for journalists in the country. The proposed Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill is a document that proposes a standard for journalism practice in the country, if passed into law, it will go a long way in addressing some of the major problems of journalism in Nigeria. This paper concludes that stakeholders must all come together to ensure a robust campaign, passage into law and effective implementation of the Act for the media to perform up to expectation as the fourth estate of the realm. The Act will contribute in ensuring a more vibrant media institution in the country which will arguably facilitate nation building. It is recommended that with the current developments and trends in the media landscape, the Bill should be reviewed to capture current realities.

Keywords: Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill, Standard of Practice, Stakeholders

Introduction

For any meaningful development to be attained, the media must operate optimally. As the fourth estate of the realm, journalism in Nigeria has been faulted in so many ways. Major areas of concern include, but not limited to issues bothering on ethics, professionalism, credibility and finances. More to these are the issues of ownership and control of media houses, bribery and corruption, censorship, safety, condition of service among other things. As Beckett and Kyrke-Smith (2007) wrote, "journalists have faced numerous problems including pressure from media owners, and financial weakness with interlinked vulnerability to corruption and declining ethical standards" (p.14).

Kellner, (2004) and Mcchesney (1999) in Kadijat, et.al (2015) also note that as the fourth estate of the realm, there are concerns bordering professionalism and ethical standards in the Nigerian media landscape. Some media critics also claim that commercialization of the media, controlled by a few multinational conglomerates have become an antidemocratic force supporting elements of capitalism to further pauperize the masses. The proliferation of private media, especially, broadcast media, resulting from the deregulation of broadcasting in 1994 explains the Nigeria context of commercialized media and media contents. The trend of these challenges has been consistent over the years. Collaborating the

challenges of media professionals in Nigeria, Okocha, et.al (2022) submit that currently, more to the challenges faced by Nigerian journalists include funding, cyberbullying, distance, and language barriers. An analysis of these confirms that if not checked, the media might be playing a role contrary to that of the fourth estate of the realm, but that of the fourth Estate of the Wreck as observed by Akinfeleye (2003).

As pointed out by McQuail (2006), both broadcast (TV and radio) and broadcast (newspaper and magazines as well as the digital media (internet based media) have been described by Edmund Burke in the late-eighteenth-century England as the Fourth Estate of the Realm or the fourth branch of government. However, the above identified factors and most probably, others not mention, if not addressed will hinder the media from effectively and efficiently exercising its responsibilities as the fourth arm of government and specifically the responsibility of holding government accountable and the citizens responsible, hence contributing to economic transformation in Nigeria and the media be accorded its deserving respect as the “fourth estate of the realm and not the fourth estate of the wreck” a new agenda for upholding and adhering social responsibility of th press must be worked out. This indicates need for a legal and statutory document that will standardize journalism practice in Nigeria, like the proposed Journalism Enhancement Bill.

Hence, a standardized and comprehensive statute will contribute in addressing some of the key obstacles to an optimal press in Nigeria. This could be achieved through the proposed Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill, if eventually assented and well implemented. Hence, an efficient media performance which is crucial to any nation building and development process in Nigeria could be attained.

It is therefore based on the above premise that this paper discusses the need for stakeholders to come up with a robust campaign for the passage into law of the proposed Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill, and ensure its optimal utilization for better journalism practice and by extension, nation building and purposeful development.

The Journalism Enhancement Bill

The proposed Journalism Enhancement Bill is bill that aims at standardizing and improving journalism practice in Nigeria. Key among the issues to be addressed as proposed by the bill include minimum entry qualification, professional registration, standard wage and salary package for journalists, commensurate to the federal civil service and insurance packages for journalists in case of injuries or death in line of duty. Proponents believe that if passed into law and well implemented, the legal document will assist in addressing so many of the challenges bedeviling the pen profession. As noted by Muhammed Garba onetime President of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), “If only we had achieved that, believe me,, a the media industry in Nigeria would have been far better because it has addressed all the challenges” (Personal Interview, 2015)

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, journalism profession is faced with numerous challenges which hamper the effectiveness and efficiency of the media as the fourth estate of the realm. Largely, these problems are multifaceted and a holistic approach needs be employed to address them. For instance, there has been an upsurge and proliferation of media outfits, both online and offline, a situation that has resulted to an increase in the employment rate of journalists. On the other hand, there is equally an upsurge of universities, both public and private across the country, with

many offering Mass Communication and journalism related courses. The numbers of graduates might certainly multiply, especially with the unbundling of Mass Communication into nine courses. The big question remains; What is the standard of practice to cater for the journalism workforce in the country? A practical solution is the attainment of legal document; providing the minimum standard of practice as well as checkmate media operations as obtainable in professions like Law and Medicine. Years back, a bill, titled the Journalism Enhancement Bill was campaigned for but could not attain the status of law. Therefore, this paper analyses the proposed Journalism Enhancement Bill vis-a-vis some of the major problems of journalism in Nigerian media landscape, with a view of emphasizing the need for a review and re-opening of the campaign for passage of the bill into law.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Challenges of the Nigerian Media

There are a number of factors that hinder optimal functioning of the Nigerian press. They are, but not limited to:

1. Poor remuneration and condition of service- The typical Nigerian journalist operates under a condition that can arguably be considered difficult. The salaries and wages of the Nigerian journalists are rated poor; non attractive, delayed and in some instances, even denied. It is common knowledge that there are media organizations that employ journalists, issue to them identification cards which are termed “meal tickets”, thereby leading to compromise of professionalism and ethical standards. Such journalists end up pursuing stories to make money and not for the primary aim of informing, educating and enlightening the public, hence halting nation building. Accordingly, Aliyu (2017) observed that

many media organizations in Nigeria employ journalists, issue them official identification cards and thereafter leave them to fend for themselves using the ID card, what is popularly called “meal ticket. The pay which is usually meager and inconsistent, thereby propelling compromise of standards and prestige of the profession.

This arguably contributes to the age long “brown envelop syndrome” that has been a cause for concern among media scholars, professionals and other stakeholders. According to Nkwocha (2004), Brown Envelope is money given to reporters or editors to influence their judgment of a story; to persuade them to write positive stories or kill a negative story. On the brown envelop syndrome in Nigeria, Okoro and Chinwebo-Opnuoha (2013) believed that it is about destroying the nobility of journalism practice in Nigeria and should therefore be a reason for concern of all stakeholders. The common practice results in compromise ethical and professional standard principle of truth and impartiality.

To a large extent, public officials involved in misconduct feel they can always get away with their misdoings because they can bribe the journalists whenever they attempt to unveil their corrupt deals. It is even worrisome when media houses publish conflicting stories whenever cases of corruption are reported by another. This outrightly contradicts the provision of the Nigerian Journalism Code of Ethics which prohibits accepting rewards and gratifications by journalists.

2. The existing gap between Mass Communication education and practice- Another factor that mitigates functioning of the media in Nigeria is the gap between journalism education and practice. Okunna (2000) wrote that, if the media most function effectively and efficiently, then there must be a synergy between training and practice,

which she said that has not been the case in the Nigerian context. When the gap is bridged, it will translate into better practice and by extension, better performance of the media, leading to a better informed society but that has not been the case as the existing gap arguably results not very competent Mass Communication graduates.

3. Ownership and control of the media- Ownership and control of the media also hampers professionalism and optimum performance of the media in Nigeria. Either public or privately owned, there tend to be certain level of control and interference with the work of the journalists. As a result of ownership and control of the media, the journalists often times, compromise professionalism because of the fear of losing their job. The Journalists compromise professionalism and dance to the tune of the powers that be. Coronel (2003) observed that, lack of financial independence further propels lack of media and editorial independence. There tend to be interference with professionalism and the affairs of the media by its funders (media owners and the state depending on the ownership pattern of the media). He suggested that for optimal performance of the media, it has to operate in a free and competitive environment, be accessible to the public and also rights of the press must be protected and ensured, as well as enhancing media accountability, capacity building and democratization of media access.

4. Corruption and the brown envelop syndrome- Like other sectors in the country, the journalism profession is also not left behind in terms of corruption. Often, the journalists compromise objectivity and ethical practice in favour of some other interest for the reward or gratification that comes with doing that. Brown envelop is usually in form of cash gifts given to the journalists by news sources. Arguably, such

gifts might lead to compromise of facts, even in instances of sensitive and public interest news. The form of corrupt practice among the Nigerian journalists has variant appellations; brown envelop, qua, last paragraph, honorarium and the likes. This has been a reason why many reports of public interest have been compromised. Some have blamed the popularity of the brown envelop as a result of the poor remuneration for the Nigerian journalists. However, Ibibi (2016) wrote that brown envelope could also be in form of things like pieces of land, automobiles or even travels on holiday to a dream country of the journalist.

Alemoh (2011) argued that it is noteworthy that there have been accusations of unethical practices among Nigerian journalists, which include bribery, corruption and a host of others in carrying out their professional responsibilities. He noted the attitude of journalists demanding for incentives after carrying out assignments, with many dropping important stories of public interest or even writing fictitious stories to promote the image of their sponsor(s).

5. Lack of a totally independence of the journalism union- The umbrella journalism union in the country, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) needs to be more independent and firm in its actions and decisions. If made more viable and independent, it will arguably make more impact; hence it can push forward crusades for the betterment of the profession. Like the union together with Media Rights Agenda and Civil Liberty Organizations, it should if also strengthen the struggle for the realization of the Journalism Enhancement Bill as it aims to address issues bothering on rights of its members. Considering the power of the pen and nobility of the profession, it should ordinarily be one of the most impactful and

powerful unions to reckon with in the country.

Considering the above challenges of journalism practice in Nigeria and more, it can be argued that it cannot be disputed that there are credible, professional and dedicated journalists in Nigeria that have the interest of the country at heart. According to Ibbi (2016), many of Nigerian journalists might not score high using the ten point attributes of a good journalists as given in Reuters Handbook (2008) as a result of the unethical and unprofessional practices among the journalists. The attributes are:

- i. Always hold accuracy sacrosanct
- ii. Always correct an error openly
- iii. Always strive for balance and freedom from bias
- iv. Always reveal a conflict of interest to a manager
- v. Always respect privileged information
- vi. Always protect their sources from the authorities
- vii. Always guard against putting their opinion in a news story
- viii. Never fabricate or plagiarize
- ix. Never alter a still or moving image beyond the requirements of normal image enhancement
- x. Never pay for a story and never accept a bribe

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is system theory. The system theory could be conceived as a multifaceted theory that investigates a situation holistically; as they relate with one another within a larger system. This is to say that because a system is made up of multiple subsystems, enhancement of the system must address each of the subsystems that make up the complex system. This theory is considered suitable in this context considering the fact

that JEB seeks to enhance the subsystems that make up the whole journalism system in the country.

The call for general systems theory was first advanced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy's research in the 1940s and 1950s. By 1968, he published a book titled; General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications with the goal of pointing out how subsystem affects causes and effect on the system while the modern application of the theory came after World War II and the advancement in technology thereafter. The theory has since then been used in different disciplines to understand circumstances around a whole system operates according to Online SMW Program (Undated).

Methodology

This study is carried out using secondary data, where review of existing literature was conducted on the problems bedeviling journalism practice in Nigeria. Also, a qualitative review of the proposed Journalism Enhancement Bill visa-a-vis challenges of journalism practice in Nigeria was carried out, from which conclusions and recommendations were made.

Why Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill

According to Coronel (2003), the media can play a positive role in democracy only if there is an enabling environment that allows them to do so. They need the requisite skills for the kind of in-depth reporting that a democratic society or state requires. Therefore, for them to perform optimally, there should be mechanisms to ensure they are held accountable to the public and that ethical and professional standards are upheld. Here, the proposed journalism enhancement bill comes in handy. The JEB when signed into law and well implemented will address most of the problems journalists in Nigeria encounter. It

provides for protection of the journalists with regards employment and condition of service, unified salary structure, insurance, rights and safety of the journalists, periodic training among other things that will enhance journalism practice as the noble profession it was known to be. The proposed bill provides for many facets of journalism practice, which if implemented, many of the problems of journalism practice would be addressed while the profession will be standardized.

The Draft Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill (2002)

Worried by the state of journalism practice in Nigeria, which is considered by many as one that needs to be improved, the Nigerian Union of journalists under the leadership of Smart Adeyemi championed the campaign to put in place a basic standard of service for journalists in the country. The union came up with a draft Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill in 2002. The 14-page document contains 11 parts with 48 sections. The first part, in line with Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution provides for freedom of the journalists to practice their profession without interference while subsection 2 prohibits arbitrary arrest, detention, prosecution or punishment of journalists. It also provides that no media establishment shall be arbitrarily closed down or sealed up for publishing any opinion or information, except in accordance to the provisions of the bill.

The second part of the draft bill provides for qualification of practice as a journalist which includes minimum required qualification to practice, establishment national examination and accreditation board as well as establishment of a registration board which will certify practice for all members. Part three of the bill prescribes conditions for the appointment of editors in media organizations in the country where a minimum of 10 years experience is required.

Part four of the draft contains the conditions for service; including salaries, allowances, leave, general and retirement benefits which are negotiable between the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) and Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON).

The fifth part of the draft Journalism Practice Bill provides for ownership of the media, rights of journalists to acquire shares in the media organizations as well as bank deposit by media owners which is subject to compliance with the processes for liquidation and winding up of the company as provided in the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA). The sixth part of the proposed bill provides for responsibility of the journalists and media. It focuses on issues bordering on duty of the journalists to uphold the fundamental rights and objectives and responsibility of governments, accuracy and authenticity of reports, objectivity and fairness, deliberate and reckless publication of inaccurate and misleading information and respect of privacy of individuals and families. Other issues provided for are punishment for sensationalizing and glorifying negative events and all other issues as contained in the Code of Ethical practice of the profession.

The establishment of a Media Practitioners Complaints Commission (MPCC) to handle complaints of professionals and ethical misconducts of journalists in the Federal Capital Territory and all states of the federation and duties and responsibilities of the commission are stipulated in the seventh part of the bill. Part eight contains the procedure for complaints while part nine deals with penalty to misconduct by journalists where found liable. Part 10 of the proposed bill provides for miscellaneous; where it is stipulated that certain posts should be reserved for a practicing journalists and subvention for media houses. The last part of the draft

document provides for interpretations of the bill. A section on the supplementary provisions relating to the Media Practitioners Complaints Commission (MPCC) is also provided.

Considering the provisions of the proposed bill, it is obvious that even though it cannot be argued that passing it into law will automatically transform journalism practice in Nigeria, but it will help in mitigating some of the main problems bedeviling the professions. Issues of underpayment or nonpayment of salaries of journalists in many instances and general condition of service for members of the pen profession will be addressed. Therefore, there is need for a concerted effort in campaigning for passage of the bill into law. This the NUJ must take the lead. However, the campaign must be conscious of the fact that passing the bill into law will not make meaningful change unless it is well implemented for the betterment of the profession and the nation at large,

Discussion

Going by the provision of Part II of the draft bill which provides for qualification of practice as a journalist which includes minimum required qualification to practice, establishment national examination and accreditation board as well as establishment of a registration board which will certify practice for all members, if attained, this could sufficiently address and kick out the issue of quackery in the profession since each practitioner must be certified by the professional body.

It might be regarded as common knowledge that editorship in especially this era of proliferation of private broadcast and online media outfits, inexperienced people serve as editors and this might be an evidence of the incessant avoidable editorial mistake and inappropriate decisions. If passed into law and implemented, Part III of the bill

addresses this problem as it prescribes conditions for the appointment of editors in media organizations in the country at a minimum of 10 years field experience.

An integral part of the problems of media operations in Nigeria is the issues of welfare and salaries of journalists. There tend to be abuse of professionals by way of way of payment very low and insufficient, sometimes delayed or even inconsistent wages and salaries by media proprietors. At present, there is no minimum standard of practice and therefore, some even simply employ journalists and allow them fend for themselves by parading themselves as journalists. This situation contributes greatly to the seemingly unending problem of rewards and gratification as it is popularly referred to as 'brown envelop syndrome', which robs journalism of its prestige and nobleness. To a large extent, resulting to compromise of editorial independence. Part IV of the draft provides for condition of service; including salaries, allowances, leave, general and retirement benefits which are negotiable between the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) and Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON).

The fifth part of the draft Journalism Practice Bill provides for ownership of the media, rights of journalists to acquire shares in the media organizations as well as bank deposit by media owners which is subject to compliance with the processes for liquidation and winding up of the company as provided in the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA). The provisions of this section could help address the overbearing influence and censorship of media owners, thereby limiting media and editorial independence.

The sixth part of the proposed bill provides for responsibility of the journalists and media. It focuses on issues bordering on duty of the journalists to uphold the

fundamental rights and objectives and responsibility of governments, accuracy and authenticity of reports, objectivity and fairness, deliberate and reckless publication of inaccurate and misleading information and respect of privacy of individuals and families. Other issues provided for are punishment for sensationalizing and glorifying negative events and all other issues as contained in the Code of Ethical practice of the profession.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that for the media to perform optimally, journalists need a comprehensive and standardized legal document protecting their rights and that of members of the society they are serving. The statute should be well campaigned for, passed into law, assented and well implemented and enforceable in the country. A number of the identified problems regarding journalism practice in the country could be addressed with passage of the proposed Journalism Practice Bill as drafted by the Nigerian Union of Journalists in 2002. As noted by Lakemfa (2010, p.27) “it is inconceivable that a profession and union so old cannot guarantee its members basic protection. Journalists were in the fore front of those who fought for Nigeria's liberation from colonialism. Today, fifty years after the country's political independence, there is need for a second liberation, this time of the journalist”.

Stakeholders must understand that realizing such an Act and ensuring its effective implementation will certainly not be an easy tasks. They must be ready to surmount the pressures from different quarters including but not limited to resistance on the part of the government, media owners/proprietors and non-professionals in the profession whose interests will be at stake when the Bill is passed into law and well implemented.

Recommendations

Even though the bill is rich, it cannot be considered all encompassing, here are other very pressing and important issues that need be considered in the event the campaign for its passage will be re-opened. These issues include but not limited to:

1. Continuous training on especially emerging trends in the profession as a result of advancement in technology should be made mandatory-considering the speed of technological advancement, it is important that journalists be entitled to continue on the job trainings so as to equip themselves with emerging technologies and their application to journalism as a profession.
2. Issues like safety of journalists and insurance packages in case of injury or death should be taken care of in the document.
3. Another key recommendation is for the Bill to prioritize issue of minimum professional qualification for journalists to practice. This will in small measure help in addressing quackery in the profession.
4. All stakeholders including; Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Guild of Editors, Nigerian Press Council, Media Rights Agenda, The National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), International Press Centre, Civil Liberty Organizations, Non-governmental Organizations and all others should come together to campaign for the realization of the Journalism Practice Enhancement Bill. Similar effort invested in pushing for freedom of Information Act in the country should be employed in this course as well. Therefore, the JEB should be reviewed before the campaign is re-

- opened with the needed commitment and determination.
5. When finally passed into law, same stakeholders should strive for its implementation for the betterment of journalism and its practice, and also, the country at large.
 6. It should be popularized right from the campaign so that people will be aware of its existence when finally in place.
 7. The Nigerian Union of Journalists should be a more formidable association with key interest in upholding the rights of its members against.

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