

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY: A ROADMAP RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between social responsibility theory and responsible journalism among media professionals in Nigeria. This paper adopted the desk research method otherwise known as library research method. This method allows for easy use of secondary data that can be gotten from journals, books, newspapers, magazine, Internet etc. and employed for discussing issue at stake by researchers. This paper has established that Nigerian journalists are not aware of the tenets of the theories guiding their professional practice. Also, profit orientation and ownership factor contributed to the dearth of adherence to the socially responsible role and development functions of the Nigerian journalists. Unfortunately, the journalists do not attach much importance to the understanding of the tenets of press theories, although knowledge of the theories is one of the core values in professional journalism. Arising from this standpoint, the paper concluded that the media have been too hamstrung to fully equip the people with the right information to assess the performances of the leaders, and to make informed decisions in the participatory quest for nation-building. The paper recommended that social responsibility should be seen by governments and other stakeholders as a duty to a journalist's conscience and a primary basis for the right of free expression without coercion or subterfuge to cow the media.

Keywords: Social Responsibility Theory, Responsible Journalism and the Nigerian Mass Media

Introduction

The media, along with society, culture, the economy, and the environment, have responsibilities under the moral principle of social responsibility. Environmental and social and cultural aspects of the local economy should be protected and even encouraged. Allowing information to flow freely is part of socially responsible behaviour, but the public should be made aware of the content of this information, and the media outlets carrying it should be held accountable for any harm caused by either outside interference or the failure to abide by industry standards. Responsibility to one's community provides the press with some independence while still permitting some form of external regulation. These ethical guidelines promote professionalism in the media by establishing a standard for exactitude, truthfulness, and completeness in reporting, and they extend beyond the bounds of merely objective

reporting into the realm of interpretive reporting. Data produced by the media are typically analysed and interpreted in ways that make people acquire true positions and coherent reports on various issues, events, and circumstances, therefore the media has a responsibility to the people and the society.

The mass media must overcome the difficulty of breaking even and being financially stable enough to be autonomous and to withstand the internal and external influences that have historically been the downfall of media professionals. Any media organisation that hopes to survive the test of time and adhere to professional standards must be financially self-sufficient. The mainstream media, on the other hand, see themselves as an institution entrusted by society with the duty of safeguarding the public interest, and they work hard to live up to this high calling. To act responsibly toward one's community With the recent influx of well-educated professionals, the Nigerian media have begun to insist on greater ethical standards and journalistic accountability. Keeping to professional standards of conduct is essential. Also, it means adhering to a code of ethics that protects one's reputation in one's field.

Journalistic ethics are the foundation upon which the profession is built, and they are essential to its success. Regardless of the nature of the group or the nature of the profession practiced within it, there exists a set of guiding moral principles that govern the organisation or profession as a whole. Due to the worrying situation of media professionals' demeanour in the conduct of their duties, numerous regulatory agencies have emerged to rein in the excesses of media professionals: The National Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) (NBC). Later, in 1998, the Nigeria Press Organisation (NPO) was formed by the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspaper Proprietors of Nigeria (NPN), Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE), and the Nigeria Press Council (NPC) to create a more thorough code of ethics for journalists (Tsegysu and Asemah, 2014). This study, then, serves as a guide to responsible journalism in Nigeria by providing background, analysis, and suggestions based on the social responsibility idea.

LITERATURE REVIEW THE JOURNALISM PROFESSION

Journalism is the practise of creating and disseminating reports on current events that are founded on verifiable facts and evidence. Journalism can refer to both a profession and a group of media workers that work together to report news that is based on verified facts. Journalism can be found in a variety of formats, such as newspapers, broadcast television, and online radio and news sites (Hasan, 2013). The practise of journalism is defined as the investigation, evaluation, production, and dissemination of news and information. It's the end result of all these endeavours, too. According to Reich (2008), journalism can be differentiated from other activities and products by some recognisable qualities and behaviours. These characteristics not only set journalism apart from other types of media, but also explain why it is crucial for democracies.

As such, journalism's goal is to provide people with the facts they need to make educated

choices regarding their personal lives, neighbourhoods, communities, societies, and governments. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2018) state emphatically that neither technology nor journalists nor their methods define journalism. Journalism's influence on society informs both its goals and its guiding principles. Reporting comes in several formats, each catering to a specific demographic. Journalists are often referred to as "the fourth estate" because of their function as "watchdogs" over the actions of government officials. Multiple types of journalism, each presented in its own unique way, can be found within a single publication. Newspapers, magazines, and websites often have sections aimed at specific demographics. Journalism's *raison d'être* is to equip citizens with knowledge so they can improve their lives and the world at large (Melisanda, 2009). Journalistic work necessitates the use of a discipline of verification in order to arrive at a functional truth, as opposed to merely fascinating or informative information. Though the method is essential, journalism is evaluated based on the story itself. The journalist prioritises the public interest and employs specific techniques — at the core of which is the discipline of verification — to obtain and evaluate information. Furthermore, journalists' principal function is to educate the general public. Both they and society are open to their influence. Their significance, he says further, rests in the fact that they are a primary driver of whatever patterns of thought, public debate, and political action may be observed (Domingo, 2017). The press plays a vital role in the system of checks and balances that supports our modern democratic government. Reporters serve as the sole medium via which monarchs can convey their will to their subjects. Journalists ensure that government leaders be held to account and fight for public interests. The media's ability to influence public opinion (whether intentionally or unintentionally) by the sequence of presentation (or relative silence) in news broadcasts has earned them the moniker "agenda setters". Assumption: the news audience will give a topic more weight if it receives a lot of media coverage (Barker, 2012).

Whereas true and balanced reporting are hallmarks of responsible journalism.

Journalists who care about their craft will do their best to report accurately on the news.

They are also responsible for verifying our information and establishing its authenticity. The inability to verify information or identify reliable sources means that journalists must be selective in what they report (Black, 2020). Whenever a journalist makes a factual error or obtains new, clarifying information, they are expected to provide a correction or update. According to Egbujor (2015), fairness entails making an effort to include multiple perspectives and allowing each to be heard without criticism. Journalists are well aware that not every viewpoint is valid, and that not every viewpoint is valued. Egbujor (2015) noted that not every viewpoint sent to the media gets published. The media does not spread openly hateful views. Furthermore, media outlets will not knowingly print anonymous or pseudonymous commentary.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This discourse is underpinned on the social responsibility theory. The media social responsibility theory came to be as a result of the Commission of the Freedom of Press in the United States of America in 1949. The theory posits that much as the press should be free to operate in any society, such freedom should carry certain responsibilities or simply the press freedom does not mean the press should do as it pleases. It should operate in recognition of

societal needs and aspiration. According to Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), an extension of libertarian theory, in that the press recognises that it has a responsibility to society to carry out its essential functions.

The social responsibility theory has some basic tenets:

1. Serving the political system by providing information for discussion and debate on public affairs.
2. Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government.
3. Safeguarding the rights of the individuals and serving as a watchdog against government.
4. Serving the economic system primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising.
5. Providing entertainment.
6. Maintaining its own self sufficiency as to be free from pressures of social interest.

The theory stipulates that the press is free to cover events as part of their duties and rights but at the same time, they owe responsibility to the people whom they serve. There is a nonnegotiable responsibility which the press as an obligation owes the masses and the political system they serve: these responsibilities are within the purview of their duty to gather, structure and disseminate accurate and comprehensive information on matters of public interest in a way that will facilitate understanding of and the support for development process (Owolabi, 2007). The reason the author anchored this paper on social responsibility theory is because the theory helps to explain that, in as much as journalists have the right to carry out their duties they should do their job with a sense of responsibility as they are integral part of development; as such they are expected to be responsible so that their actions will not hinder development in the society that they operate.

METHODOLOGY

The research strategy utilised for this work was desk research, often known as the library research strategy. According to Jumbo, Macaulay, Megwa, Okpongpong, Ukpong & Etumnu (2022), this approach entails locating relevant secondary data, analysing it in light of the topic at hand, and finally formulating and communicating a concept. The studies conducted by other academics can be accessed, reviewed, and assessed, making this a valuable secondary source of data collection. Access to secondary sources simplifies the dissemination of knowledge. Researchers are able to quickly and easily use secondary data gleaned from a variety of sources (books, journals, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, etc.) to inform their deliberations on the topic at hand.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MEDIA REPORTAGE

The media perform developmental role as they inform and educate the masses. Put differently, the development role of the media is a product of education and information they render to society (Locksley, 2009). In other words, the mass media play critical roles in delivering the information people need for participating in development-related matters and

decisions that would shape their present lives without jeopardising their future growth (Folarin, 2002; Locksley, 2009). Soola (2003) maintains that the newspaper is to be used for development purposes and educate policy makers to implement 'development-friendly' initiatives. Undoubtedly, development journalism derives its power from the theoretical basis of development theory. While relating to this, Ahva (2017) holds that development journalism should not be seen or learnt only from the professional perspective but from the very basis of the theory which enacts how journalism should be practiced.

Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) propose that the media are free but must be responsible. Their freedom allows them to serve as watchdogs over the government. This function allows them to charge the government to be accountable to the citizens. Stories on government failings (bad state of the roads, poor health facilities, unpaid salaries and disasters, among others, attract the attention of the journalists (Iqbal, Ali, Saleem & Khursheed, 2014) which they aim to help the government know and address. Scanlon and Jones (2015) expatiate further that reporters are interested in collecting data and information about damage, destruction and casualties to inform so that relevant authorities will take heed. For the relevant authorities to take decisive actions on disaster, crimes and conflict, the mass media should have constructed compelling key elements and disseminated same. Also, Carli, Capobianco & Sagant (2008) and Puddephatt (2013) have hinted that the socially-responsible role of the media enhances them to bring the issues of conflict to the level of public discussion (for resolution).

THE ROLE OF THE RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISTS

There is strong interconnection between communication provided by the journalists and development to the extent there will be no meaningful development without communication. Okenwa (2002) opines that communication is central to the process of development to the extent that the dependence of one on the other has virtually been taken for granted. Communication and development play complementary roles. While communication facilitates understanding of and the support for development process, development in turn leads to improved communication skills and infrastructure. Communication and development are interconnected to the extent they play complimentary role to each other.

In pursuance of these roles for development, mass media play array of roles in Nigeria society. They range from social, cultural, political, roles. They are explained as flows:

1) Political Role:

Mass media provide viable platform for political engineering of a democratic nation. They provide the platform for political campaigns, presentation of political manifestoes, and candidates for election on radio, television, internet, face book, billboards, newspaper, magazines, telephone, etc. This role enables the electorate to make informed political decision so as to vote the candidate of their choice. Mass media also educate the electorate on election guidelines and their civic responsibility which helps in breaking their political apathy. The media today stand as vibrant people's parliament in order to enlighten the electorate on how to vote and protect their votes.

2) Economic Role:

Mass media provide the fundamental framework upon which goods, services, ideas, political parties and their candidates are presented and promoted to the target public or prospective consumers for acceptance, loyalty and patronage. This role, no doubts, serves as a catalyst for industrial revolution of a capitalist economy like Nigeria. Economic actors need accurate and timely information to allocate resources efficiently. Investors and other groups increasing value and demand a governance-monitoring role from the media. A free and independent press can provide information and monitoring to the economic policy development process leading to more effective economic policies. It can also reduce political risk and increase good governance: conditions that are important for robust economic development.

3) News/Information Role

It is the primarily role of the mass media to gather, process and disseminate news and information on happenings and what is about to happen in society within and outside the nation. They disseminate information concerning major issues, events and people across the world. The traditional role of the mass media in national development is to inform the masses about societal events. Nkwocha (2005) states that the mass media keep the people informed on political and government matters to enable them make rational decisions. The mass media are also dispensers of corporate organizations and educational institutions information to the masses or target public.

4) Education Role:

The media of mass communication have significant assignment in educating the masses on issues of public interest. The education could be formal or informal. According to Ekwelie (2006), the media are potent tools for imparting knowledge to people in society. They are also veritable instruments for skills acquisition in different fields of human endeavour aimed at attaining national development.

5) Entertainment Role:

Mass media are sources of entertainment in society. This role reduces boredom in our lives especially when we are stressed up. Media provide a catharsis to the lives of their audience. Some of the media programmes titillate us to the point of taking media drama as real-life event.

6) Social Role

In order for development to be just and sustainable, citizens must productively participate in the decisions that shape their lives. Participation requires an informed citizenry. A free and independent media supply timely and relevant information to citizens allowing them to change their own behaviour and to demand higher social standards for society.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

The mass media practitioners hold a major stake in every democratic society. Hardly can any

society that lays claim to operating a democratic governance achieve its set goals without the involvement of the mass media. This explains why the press has been rightly described as the Fourth Estate of the Realm (in British concept). The concept implies that the journalists play as vital role in the governance of democracy as the other three branches – the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. This concept is however not to be understood to mean a relationship of compromise. Rather, just as the first three arms of the government are in principle, interdependent, but in reality, checkmating each other, the press too, is expected to play both complementary roles at the same time a watchdog role over the three arms.

The journalists ought to act as the watchdog on behalf of the public on other centers of powers in society. In other words, the journalists are expected to stand apart often in an adversary stance. Affirming this view, Adeyanju (2005) says that the press is expected to play the role of an early warning system against major troubles that loom on the horizon of a nation or a community. Adeyanju stressed that when the press has the clear concept of its role and it is allowed to play the role effectively, there will be few problems of responsibility. However, Kadiri (2009) regrets that in the actual world of journalism, there seems to be multiple concepts and interpretation of responsibility of the media, a situation which attracts the contradictions surrounding responsibility of the media.

Fundamental to the conflicts interpretation of responsibility is government incessant attempts to manipulate the media into playing the role of mouthpiece rather than a watchdog role. In so doing, the governments often try to redefine the concept of press freedom using such subterfuge as national security or public safety. By this, the government and their agencies ensure that the journalist is only free to report issues to the public as long as their reports are not in conflict with national security or public interest. Ironically, in attempting to gag the journalists ostensibly to protect public interest, the interest of the public become endangered, or destroyed outright. Freedom and responsibility of the media are closely related to each other. In spite of the close relationship between the concepts, responsibility of the media should not be used as a decoy to prevent the practitioner from reporting the unusual and the exceptional if such reports are of genuine public interest.

Corroborating this view, Campell (2004) remarks that the freedom of the press is not merely a right of the publisher or journalists, but also the public's right to know all sides of an issue of public interest. He stressed that a free press is essential for democracy, adding that it was the reason freedom of the press had been established in most countries of the world through hard and difficult struggle. In spite of the truism pertaining the freedom of the press as bulwark to democratic governance, Kadiri (2009) reports that political powers and governments in many countries – especially the developing countries – have tried to stifle and suppress the media using all kinds of subterfuge in order to achieve their preconceived objectives. According to Kadiri, various negative strategies including licensing, censorship and prohibition are often used to compel the press to operate within the confines of their (governments) version of the responsibility of the press.

Notwithstanding however, liberal thinkers still believe that the responsibility of the media

should not be misconstrued to mean a device by which to gag or intimidate the journalists from carrying out their constitutionally prescribed roles in a democratic society. Press freedom and social responsibility represent a synergy meant to keep governments and their officials on toes for effective discharge of their obligations to the people – the public. To underscore the vital role of the media in a democratic society, Sarkar (1984) in Alanana (2003) quotes Indian's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to have said that, "I would rather have a completely free press with all the dangers in the wrongful use of that freedom than a suppressed... press" (p.315).

The journalists act as a watchdog of government, as a gatekeeper, as well as purveyors of information meant to edify and keep the public fully informed about issues and occurrences. In other words, journalists should be alive to, and reflect interests and trends in the society. The responsibility of the media is to set agenda through accurate and truthful information for public debate by making inquiries on matters of public interest and publishing the findings for the public to be fully informed.

Information – truthful and accurate- is power; it is a conduit pipe for a meaningful socio-economic development and a catalyst for political transformation of democratic governance. Accurate and balanced information unlocks doors to new ideas, which in turn help to keep the citizenry better equipped to take informed decisions for the progress of a society. To function well in this direction, the public needs to trust the press by presenting verifiable, true, accurate and balanced information. The highest evidence of social responsibility of the press lies more with a total devotion to upholding public trust. It may hold sways in some instances that journalists often betray the public trust by developing a negative attitude of *good news is no news*, resulting in the neglect of developmental activities or the positive sides of life, it must however be pointed out that the governments often major culprits in the convoluted interpretation responsibility. This consequently gives rise to adversarial relationship whereby the journalists are regarded as obstructive and a clog to sociopolitical stability in a society.

In their bid to report the truth about government failure as part of their watchdog role, the journalists are often seen as acting irresponsibly. This way, the government and the media see responsibility from crossing perspectives. To the government, the journalist acts responsibly and in line with public interest and national security when they support their failures; when the journalists cover the gross dereliction and inefficiency of the governments; when the truthful accounts, but which may be considered embarrassing, are either under-reported or suppressed.

The implication of this kind of reportage as Kehinde, Yinusa, Muhammed, and Raji (2015) point out, is that it impairs the effectiveness of the media as social institution of public trust. Kedinde *et al* (2015) indict the beat system of news coverage as major culprit in the compromised journalistic practice where over familiarity often gives rise to compromise between the journalist and the government officials who are out to cover up their misdeeds and shortcomings leading to indulging the reporters to compromise.

Reporting public affairs, as Best (2005) argues, is more like advertising, portrayed rather mere background noise in the perception of the public. What happens at the centre of power is given an excessive, imbalanced publicity, contrary to the requirement of social responsibility which prescribes accurate, balanced and truthful dissemination of information to the public, and holding the government accountable through constructive criticism and depiction of their failures. This way, there is internal information imbalance against the hue of international information imbalance.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY: APPLICATION AND CONSTRAINTS

The press is generally believed to have certain social obligations, but the extent to which these obligations are fulfilled remains a doubt in developing societies owing to several impediments. In the democratic system, the media is expected to regulate and direct its practice voluntarily without external coercion or subversion. While carrying out its task, the media is expected to be guided by good practices and management, with its social obligation to the public in sharp focus. This entails being objective and free from bias. This forms the background to the concept of social responsibility of the press, which had evolved over a long period of time. Political free thinkers, proponents of libertarian views and those who fostered a democratic spirit like John Milton had a profound influence on the growth of the notion of social responsibility. The press is a child of liberty and freedom, free speech and expressions. Clearly, this has often been cited as a pattern and framework for many nations which resolved to opt for a free press. The United States of America particularly saw freedom of speech and expression as sacred phenomenon and so it was regarded non-negotiable. This provided an impetus to the movement towards press freedom, which the First Amendment fully encapsulated.

Prior to this time, the press was widely faulted for being socially irresponsible. The Commission thus exhorted the press of its obligation to project a representative picture of the constituent groups in society. The Commission charged the press to portray more faithfully the true condition and aspiration of ethnic and religious minorities and rural people. It urged the press to adopt affirmative action in this regard. It also addressed a broad array of questions dealing with the future of the press in a society out of which First Amendment to the US Constitution grew. It called for action by the press itself to correct some perceived excesses as characterized in the application of Libertarian Press Theory. This admonition points out a striking difference between Libertarian and social responsibility theories. While Libertarian press theory holds that the society would function better if the media were allowed to operate as they deemed fit and wanted, the social responsibility theory took exception to absolute freedom unattached with responsibility.

Thus, the social responsibility theory urges the media to do what the libertarian theory assumes they will do - providing a free market place of ideas. However, Ravi (2012) says the Commission insisted that a new era of public responsibility for the press had arrived. The interest of the public must be paramount and so the press should ensure that their performance be based on public service interest. From the foregoing, it can be understood

that the emerging theory from the libertarian- social responsibility- does not deny the rationality of man, although it puts far less confidence in it than the libertarian theory; but it does seem to deny that man is innately motivated to search for truth and to accept it as his guide. Under the social responsibility theory man is viewed not so much irrational as lethargic. He is capable of using his reason but he is loath to do so.

If man is to remain free, he must live by reason instead of accepting passively what he hears, sees or feels. Therefore, the alert elements of the community must goad him into the exercise of his reason. Without such goading man is not likely to be moved to seek the truth. The languor which keeps him from using his gift of reason extends to all public discussion. Man's aim is not to find truth but to satisfy his immediate needs and desires. To this, Akpoveta (2010) says it is the press that must be the more alert element and keep the public informed as he stressed that an informed populace is the cornerstone of democratic societies, the world over. But given the convoluted interpretation of social responsibility of the media as given by most developing democracies in the world particularly in Nigeria, it stands to reason as to how the press can actually ensure an informed populace. Nigeria is one of the developing democracies where the notion of social responsibility theory has been twisted, leaving only a warp version and interpretation of the theory to guide media practices and reporting. What the governments and their agencies consider and see as social responsibility of the media is quite antithetical to the spirit and soul of the concept of social responsibility as envisioned both by the Hutchin's Commission report and the theory that emerged from the report.

To the government in Nigeria, responsibility of the media is not what keeps them on toes to discharge their responsibility creditably to the citizenry. It is not when the media engage them in constructive criticisms of their policies and misdeeds as advocated in the concept of social responsibility theory. It is not accurate reports about what governments or their agencies want to keep away from the knowledge of the public. Nigeria, as well as other developing democracies harps on social responsibility of the press in manner that actually leaves the press hamstrung. The press is only deemed socially responsible when its reports cushion their psyches in an apparent attempt to gag the media. With this as framework for defining the application of social responsibility theory, it is unrealistic for the press to successfully ensure the populace is well equipped with right information.

Many factors impede the application of social responsibility of the media, particularly in Nigeria. Adeyanju (2005) points out that besides governments and their agencies, the owner and managers of the media often determine which persons, which facts, which versions of these facts, should reach the public. Consequently, the tenet of social responsibility theory which makes it incumbent on the press to provide truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's event is subverted. The media can only provide a forum for the exchange of comments and criticisms, providing a representative picture of the constituent groups in a society when governments and owners of media establishments genuinely key into, and accept the true version and application of social responsibility. Short of this

expectation from the key deciders in a social system, it is impossible for the press to discharge the responsibility of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of society as well as providing full access to the day's intelligence as envisioned in the tenet of social responsibility theory.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Nigerian journalists do not understand the fundamental principles that underpin their chosen profession. Lack of devotion to socially responsible roles and development responsibilities by Nigerian journalists was also influenced by a focus on profit and ownership. Although familiarity with press theories is fundamental to the practise of professional journalism, the journalists did not place a high value on learning about them. Instead, they placed a higher value on ownership's sway and the financial motivation than they did on theoretical understanding. This study's findings suggest a broken system in Nigeria, where journalists are hampered by a variety of socioeconomic conditions and ownership influence. It is in everyone's interest for the press to be able to function according to the principles of normative theories of the press. In addition, a Higher Diploma or Bachelor's Degree in a field connected to communication should be the very minimum requirement for entry into the media sector if journalists are to be taken seriously as professionals and if they are to exhibit a high level of role orientations (normative and cognitive processes).

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