

Towards Symbiosis: Reflections on Government/Media Relations in NigeriaNsikak Solomon Idiong¹, Effiong John Udofia²¹Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria²Department of Mass Communication, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria**Corresponding Author***

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Abstract: The media, like other institutions, do not exist in a vacuum. They operate within societies, within geo-political entities, and within the framework, restrictive or liberal, provided by other institutions and structures within any given society. Government is one of the most important factors that influence the operations of the media. Ideally, the relationship between the government and the media should be symbiotic, but in Nigeria, that relationship is often adversarial. Although some scholars have argued that the media cannot afford to be in cahoots with the government if the public's information needs are to be served, a counter-argument is provided in this paper to the effect that the aims of development journalism and of social responsibility cannot be easily achieved if politicians and journalists cannot find a way of coexisting. The authors of this paper point to instances where governments were toppled because of their perceived insouciance and their intolerance toward press freedom.

Conversely, journalists are reminded of the media's role in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, when some of the media were accused of beating the drums of discord and of internecine strife. In conclusion, the argument is made that the liaison between government and the media is one of society's most important relationships and whoever trifles with that balance endangers not just the press and the government but the very survival of civilized society.

Keywords: *Media, journalism & social responsibility, relationship between government and media*

Introduction

On Sunday, January 6, 2019, some soldiers invaded the offices of *Daily Trust* Newspapers in Maiduguri, Abuja, Kaduna, and Lagos. The ostensible justification for that military irruption was "a publication that the army authorities considered to be in bad taste" (*The Sun*, 2019). Prior to and even after that incident, the press in Nigeria had suffered – and, in many cases, continues to suffer – from the repressive tendencies of government, as exemplified by arrests, closures, and other sundry acts of censorship and suppression recorded between 1984 and the present day. The most egregious of the instruments of that suppression – a veritable tool of Stalinist coercion unsurpassed in its sheer atrociousness, its viperish malevolence, and its vindictive all-inclusiveness – was The Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusations) Decree. Drafted on March 29, 1984, and promulgated by the military regime of General

Mohammadu Buhari on April 17 the same year, Decree 4, as it became notoriously known, was the ultimate instantiation of the intolerance habitually exhibited towards the press by many governments in pseudo-democratic societies in general, in Africa as a whole, and in Nigeria in particular.

Why is this historical anamnesis necessary? First, it is born out of the need to remind today's generation of journalists that the profession to which they belong – and which some of them seem to practise in a happy-go-lucky manner – has never been a path strewn with roses. Second, the history of the regime that promulgated Decree 4 – and particularly the ignominious end of that regime – offers signal lessons on why the press should be cultivated, not antagonised, by the government. Third, in the context of Nigeria's contemporary democratic experience, that flashback provides a background against which to situate the normative suggestions that are made in this essay.

The Practice of Journalism in Contemporary Nigeria: A Review of Ethics

To assess the journalism profession in Nigeria today is to acquaint oneself with all that is commendable as well as all that is deplorable, even contemptible, about the news vocation. One will find in Nigerian journalism abundant specimens of “that serious-minded, civic-spirited and reflective news gathering and... commentary (that we need) to have if, in this dangerous world, we are to combine caution, resolution, and longevity” (Inglis, 2002, p. xiii). Regrettably, however, one is also likely to encounter what the same author describes as “ruthless profiteering, ideological bigotry, and human monstrosity” fudged into “a revolting diet of hatred, cruelty, insatiable greed and vindictive envy” (p. xi).

Among Nigerian journalists, there are many who still strive to practise journalism that is truthful, faithful to the facts, bearing witness of human actuality to readers, viewers, and listeners, and then matching the story with adequate feelings and moral judgement. Such journalists are to be found in many newsrooms today – such a newsroom as, that of Arise News, a television station that has risen to national prominence in the aftermath of the #EndSARS protests, boldly relaying to a horrified world the firsthand testimonies of witnesses who attested to the homicidal atrocities perpetrated by rogue soldiers against peaceful demonstrators at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos on the night of October 20, 2020. To watch Arise News during that episode and in the days that followed was to be reminded of some of the best journalism of Martha Gellhorn, one of the great war correspondents of the 20th century, who, while serving on the reportorial staff of *Collier's Weekly*, popularised an austere style that demanded telling the story with few adornments, with vividness, and with fidelity to the facts (Bender, Davenport, Drager & Fedler, 2019).

To commend that style of journalism is not to suggest that all Nigerian journalists must aim for an “aseptic” objectivity. As Michael Schudson has amply illustrated, journalism has long struggled with itself over the supremacy of facts versus the energy given to a story by slant and advocacy (Schudson, 2008). Long ago, Walter Lippmann proved rather convincingly that interpretation and commentary are inseparable from the selection of facts. Nowadays, nobody expects a reporter to narrate the news like an automaton, without colour, and without style. However, nobody also expects a news organisation to dodge a momentous event as the Nigerian Television Authority did when NTA International showed how to prepare *ogbono* soup while soldiers were shooting at protesters in Lagos!

On the other hand, there is an embarrassing surfeit of sensationalism in certain aspects of Nigerian journalism today. Increasingly, our streets and newsstands are full of journalistic ephemera that sprout

and shrivel according to the ebb and flow of the political tide. Many of these rag sheets, established on a whim by political journeymen, exist solely to burnish the image of their sponsor(s) and to serve as attack dogs against perceived enemies. Some of the hands recruited to serve on such publications have no formal journalistic training. In many cases, they are not eligible for any regular stipends from their so-called employers, relying only on their identity cards and, in some cases, on their accreditation by the Nigeria Union of Journalists for a meal ticket. In this new political economy, journalism is predicated on the struggle for survival and news more than ever becomes a tradable commodity. The result is an alacritous propensity towards mendacity and a slavish obsequiousness to whoever can pay one's bills, however, corrupt such a person and however repulsive their demands may be (Akpan & Idiong, 2012).

One should hasten to add that money is both a boon and a snare to good journalism. Funds are necessary for journalistic independence but funds can also make reporters subservient to political moneybags. In his classic work *Utopia*, first published in 1516, the English philosopher Thomas More wrote that "a man with as much mental agility as a lump of lead or a block of wood, a man whose utter stupidity is paralleled only by his immorality, can have lots of good, intelligent people at his beck and call, just because he happens to possess a large pile of gold coins" (More, 2016, p. 17). But journalists are not and should not be hatchet men. The journalism of character assassination has never and will never build society. What good purpose is served when an editor runs a banner headline describing the governor of a state as "a yahoo boy"? Is that the same journalism once practised by the Lateef Jakandes, the Anthony Enahoros, the Ray Ekpus, the Chris Anyanwus, and the Bayo Ohus of this world? As Idiong (2019, p. 209) has noted, "keeping power in check does not consist in calumniating holders of public office." Nigerian journalists of today (and holders of political office alike) should be reminded, if they have forgotten, that

the media, through argument and advocacy, made democracy possible...The cause of democracy was championed by journalists and editors, often risking life and liberty to make their case. Within a modern democracy, the media have an ongoing responsibility to exercise vigilance – to nurture, protect and celebrate a range of features that keep democracy healthy, preventing it from corruption, manipulation, misuse, and apathy (Watson and Hill, 2012, p. 75).

Too often journalists of this generation forget that their profession is a sacred trust. Our forebears sacrificed too much and endured too long for us to trifle with what they bequeathed to us. In order for journalists to be taken seriously by governments and by other arms of society, journalists must first take themselves seriously. The first step towards gaining the respect of the public is to honour the ethics of the profession, those time-tested principles of good practice that centre on truth and accuracy, independence, fairness and balance, public accountability, minimisation of harm, avoidance of libel, and a striving for professionalism (Itule & Anderson, 2008).

Why Government should not Antagonise Journalists: Lessons from the Past

In 1984, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor both of the *Guardian* newspaper published three articles "on the reorganisation of Nigeria's diplomatic service... in which they attributed their information directly to specific sources rather than using vague ... information" (*Los Angeles Times*, 1985). For that

supposed indiscretion, Thompson and Irabor were jailed for almost 11 months. In an address to the nation to announce the overthrow of the Buhari junta on August 27, 1985, Major-General Ibrahim Babangida noted that his predecessor “was too rigid and uncompromising.” He pointed out that Nigeria had become “a country where individuals (were) under the fear of expressing themselves” (Dawodu.com, 2020). In summary, part of the reason the Babangida regime was initially welcomed by a cross-section of Nigerians was that they were tired of the repressiveness of the Buhari regime. Furthermore, the new administration began by annulling the major legal instrument (Decree 4 of 1984) which its predecessor had used to victimise journalists. Even though the new junta was later to prove almost as repressive as its forerunner or even more so, it had its honeymoon.

The point being made here is that when properly managed, the relationship between the government and the media can be mutually beneficial to both parties. It can also conduce to the wellbeing of society. When allowed to turn sour, however, it can be highly injurious, not least to the government itself. According to Freedom House (2019, n.p.);

Journalists played a key role in the April 2019 ouster of authoritarian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria, not only by reporting on anti-government protests but also by staging their own demonstrations when major news outlets failed to give due attention to the popular movement... Before Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir was removed from office... citizen journalists and exile-based outlets filled the gap, disseminating news and images largely via the internet. As frustration with al-Bashir’s misrule grew throughout the winter and he perceived the extent of the threat to his power, his regime cracked down, arresting journalists who covered mass protests and revoking the credentials of some foreign reporters. As in Algeria, journalists staged their own protests. Military commanders attempted to placate the public after al-Bashir’s arrest, announcing the end of media censorship and tacitly acknowledging that a perception of increased press freedom would help consolidate their control.

Recently, the Nigeria Union of Journalists banned media coverage of the activities of the Nigeria Police Force in Delta State because of the brutalisation of a member of the union (Sahara Reporters, 2020). These examples suggest that press freedom is good for both the press and the government. Increasingly, people in power are coming to the realisation that the media are an indispensable part of society and that journalists cannot be wished away. Politicians may refer to the press as “fake news” or as ‘the enemy of the people,’ as Donald Trump habitually did (*The Washington Post*, 2018; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). That continual vilification of the press might well exacerbate the erosion of public confidence in the mainstream media, but it is unlikely to destroy the media or to erase them from the political landscape.

In a sense, the attempt to disparage and denigrate the media is an intuitive outcome of the unfulfilled desire on the part of governments in some parts of the world to control or monopolise ownership of the media. Alas, in a world of mobile telephony, of social media, and of instant messaging, that hankering

for paternalistic control is no longer realistic. Consequently, media and government must find new ways of mutual coexistence for the common good. McLean and McMillan (2003, p. 340) agree with this assertion when they observe that “governments are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain close control and supervision (of the mass media), especially with the spread of satellite, cable, and Internet, the advent of global media networks, and increased cross-media ownership.”

In the light of the foregoing, what principles should guide government/media relations in future? The following section contains some suggestions offered in the context of an evolving media terrain.

Between Hegemony and a Public Sphere: Which Way the Media?

Thus far, this discussion has tended to emphasize the role of the media in society, suggesting whether directly or obliquely that the media’s contribution to the democratic process is, on the balance, positive. That notion – the idea that the media can provide a more or less autonomous and open arena for public debate – is attributed to the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. According to McQuail (2010, p. 180), “in Habermas’s account of the rise of democracy... subsequent developments have included the...substitution of mass communication for the interpersonal discussion among the elites.” In the words of McNair (2011, p. 18), the public sphere “comprises... the communicative institutions of society, through which facts and opinions circulate and by means of which a common stock of knowledge is built up as the basis for collective political action: in other words, the mass media.” According to McQuail, the media serve as a public sphere when they enlarge the space for debate, interconnect citizens and governments, challenge the monopoly of government over politics, and extend freedom and the diversity of publication. The question one ought to ask, in the light of the foregoing, is: How often do the media in Nigeria do these things? Put differently, perhaps the question might go thus: How free are the government-owned media in particular to play these roles?

These questions led the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci to develop the theory of cultural hegemony as a way of explaining how the media contribute to the dominance of one group over another in society. The emphasis of this theory, McNair insists, “is not on the media’s support for a particular political party...but the part they play in reinforcing and reproducing a generalised popular consensus” (2011, p. 57). Ericson, Baranek & Chan (2001, p.12) suggest that “hegemony addresses how superordinates manufacture and sustain support for their dominance over subordinates through dissemination and reproduction of knowledge that favours their interests, and how subordinates alternatively accept or contest their knowledge.” For Ericson *et al.*, therefore, “journalists and their news organisations are key players in hegemonic processes. They do not simply report events, but participate in them and act as protagonists” (p. 16). In many parts of Africa and the developing world, governments are adept at applying pressure on the media in order to rob them of any semblance of independence and make them malleable to the dictates of the ruling class (McKee, 2005). By so doing, those in power have turned some journalists into what the American media analyst David Barsamian describes as “stenographers of power” (Barsamian, 2002, p. iii), meaning basically that such journalists, whether employed by the state or the private sector, are condemned to the fate of merely replicating verbatim the script handed down by the power elite. The danger of such a situation, many scholars of political communication agree, is that the press may find itself unable to give vent to minority voices, unions,

fringe groups, and the disadvantaged. The result is likely to be that the press loses its credibility, acquiring the image of the poodle of the powerful or what Akpan and Idiong (2009, p. 205) call “barefaced bootlicking lapdogs,” a status which, needless to say, would be in nobody’s interest.

Perhaps it is time for the Nigerian media to ask themselves: Do they want to remain instruments of political hegemony or do they want to become agoras for the public exchange of ideas? As a nation, does Nigeria want to return to the immediate aftermath of the Independence struggle when the regions used their media organs to fight the central government and to champion their own ethnic causes? Or are the nation’s journalists and citizens mature enough to remember the media’s role in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 and even in our Nigeria’s Civil War and to realise that the media were never meant to beat the drums of discord and of internecine strife? These are questions Nigerian journalists must ask themselves as they reappraise their relationship with the government and their place in the nation’s struggle for democracy.

Towards a Government/Media Symbiosis: A Concluding Note

The traditional conceptualisation of the role of the press in a democracy is as the proverbial “Fourth Estate of the Realm,” a term “reputedly coined by Edmund Burke in late-eighteenth-century England to refer to the political power possessed by the press, on a par with the other three ‘estates’ of power in the British realm: Lords, Church, and Commons” (McQuail, 2010, p.168). That view, while not necessarily harking back to the now-debunked claims of the hypodermic needle theory, gives the media the ability to provide or withhold publicity and to report and comment on the deliberations, assemblies, and acts of government.

Governance, all will agree, is impossible without information dissemination. In fact, Parris (2010, p. xvii) goes as far as to say that “words do not oil the wheels of politics: they *are* the wheels of politics” (emphasis added). From Ancient Greece to the present day, genuine democracy has always been an ongoing dialogue between the governors and the governed. The Greeks called it *dialogesthai*, a conversation (Idiong, 2009, p. 214). To recapture the dialogic nature of democracy and secure a mutually beneficial relationship between the media and the government, the government’s interactions with the press must not be built on condescension; that is, the relationship should not be hinged on superiority versus inferiority, or on the assumptions of patron-versus-protégé relations. Immediately the ideas of masterhood and vassalage are introduced into the relationship it becomes problematic.

Furthermore, while the media can be reasonably expected to work towards the preservation of the democratic status quo, an overweening effort to bridle or micromanage them is likely to prove counterproductive. For that reason, the recent decision by the National Broadcasting Commission to sanction AIT, Channels Television, and Arise News over their coverage of the #EndSARS protests is highly regrettable (Premium Times, 2020).

Admittedly, the media have sometimes seen themselves as having a license to question the status quo and to rattle the establishment. However, that license does not permit subversion, nor does it condone disrespect to constituted authority. The press, like all other segments of society, has a vested interest in the preservation of representative democracy and the maintenance of public order. To instigate the

violent overthrow of an elected government or to deliberately expose elected officials to unwarranted ridicule is neither in the interest of good governance nor of the press.

Finally, there will never be a responsible press corps until journalists are well remunerated. Consequently, there is a need for government to improve the remuneration package of journalists in its employ, as well as sponsor their training and retraining. Such initiatives will, one hopes, motivate private employers to also enhance the welfare and skill set of their journalists. Journalism is not only one of the most hazardous jobs in the world, it is also one of the most vicissitudinous, “now admired and applauded, now criticised and disparaged” (Inglis, 2002, p. x). A society that values its doctors and engineers should also value its reporters and newscasters, especially since they labour daily to keep open the sphere of public dialogue and civic interaction.

In summary, the liaison between government and the media is one of society’s most important relationships. Much hinges on it: the health of democracy, the wellbeing of the populace, the understanding and rapprochement between elected officials and those who may become disgruntled as a result of policy decisions and governmental practices, the nation’s prosperity, and indeed the entire social balance that prevents chaos and makes productive activity possible. Whoever trifles with that balance endangers not just the press and the government but the very survival of civilised society. For that reason, both government and the media are well-advised to protect their symbiotic relationship and to ensure that it works for the good of society as a whole.

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