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## HINDRANCES TO EFFECTIVE JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

Journalistic freedom is one that is considered important for an effective media in any democracy. In like manner, press freedom is entrenched in the constitutions of most democratic societies but what is worrisome is that, almost always, journalists are not granted access to information they desire to function properly. This is what necessitated this study: "Hindrances to Effective Journalism Practice in Nigeria", in order to find out the factors responsible for the ugly incidence of journalists' inaccessibility to information. Adopting the descriptive research method; and anchored on the Libertarian Media Theory, the paper concluded that despite the fact that press freedom is a constitutional one, journalists are not free in the performance of their avowed obligation of feeding the public with the information they need to make right decisions-- politically, economically and otherwise. The paper recommended among other things that government should allow the media (press) complete freedom to enable them do better in their job; and that those practitioners who require additional training to make them perform optimally should be sent for refresher courses through the attendance of workshops and seminars.

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**Keywords:** *\*Journalism\*Freedom \*Press \*News \*Fourth Estate \*Journalist*

### INTRODUCTION

The fourth estate of the realm was first alluded to the press by Edmund Burke after observing the activities of the reporters at the gallery in the English parliament. This was however after he had taken cognisance of the already existing three estates of the early English society which were the Clergy, the Peerage and the Commons. This allusion to the press if carefully viewed through a prism, lays on the journalists a huge responsibility. It is more of a liability than an asset.

In discharging his duties as demanded by his vocational calling, a journalist tries as much as possible to ensure that most of the characteristics of news are manifest in his reports. These characteristics are: objectivity, balance, simplicity, accuracy, attribution, relevance, identification and conciseness. This means that a journalist must not be faulted for whatever reason, for as it is said, 'ignorance is not an excuse in law'. A journalist who intentionally or inadvertently files a report that fails to reflect any of the identified attributes would be in for an ugly deal. This is because no other profession has been so checkmated by prying eyes than the journalism profession. Then the question of professional ethics is out there to interrogate such an erring journalist. In other words, a journalist must, for example, subject his gate-keeping function to Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative or other ethical guidelines before deciding on what to include in his report and what not to include.

The press is peopled by journalists and the work of journalists is journalism, which Rabi (2007) defines as an explanatory function to the society. As he puts it, "it is into exposition: What happened? To whom?, Where?, When?, Why?, Wow? These are the questions lying at the heart of the study and functions of journalism".

Good enough, section 22 of the Nigeria's (1999) constitution as amended states that the "the press-radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives... and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people". Ngwokor (2018) affirms this when he wrote that the press by the constitutional provision has the right to gather, write and disseminate information (news) without any form of restraints from any quarters. "Freedom of the press is derived from the 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1959 Bill of Rights (p.127). Making a submission on the actual meaning of press freedom, Blackstone as cited in Tom (2006) writes: "It is a principle of common law highly regarded as one of the great bulwarks of liberty which is entrenched in the constitutions of the free world, not in those of totalitarian nations" (p.3.).

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Press Freedom**

Every functional society is expected to recognise the need for free press, for this is what serves as a parameter for measuring the freedom of the governed or citizens. By press freedom, therefore, it means that the press

shall be allowed access to all kinds of information which serve the need or interest of the greatest number. Freedom of the press is a constitutional one and most democratic societies permit it in order for citizens to have access to information through the media, whose job is to survey the environment for trending news-worthy information which they gather, process and disseminate for the consumption of their audience. Tom as cited in Ngwokor (2018) writes that press freedom simply means: "there is to be no censorship, no restraint should be placed on the press as to what they should publish" (p. 129). Justifying the reason why the press should be free in all societies, Oloyede (2008) writes "in 1644, John Milton, in defiance of the obnoxious English law which required authors to publish only under license, published the *Areopagitica*, a forceful plea for; and great defense of freedom of speech and press" (p. 7).

Today in our society, there is an escalated perpetration and perpetuation of evil by those in authority, especially the politicians. One of such evil is attempting to make every man to be silent even in the face of injustice. Where all men are silent for fear of negative sanction, the press does not do same; never emasculated. The worst that can happen is for it to go underground while still able to publish. For a press system of any country to be a vocal cord, it must be free to gather, write and disseminate for the benefit of its audience, as well as servicing the political, economic and social fabrics of the society. In short, in democratic environments, press freedom should not be treated as a subject of negotiation. It should be completely free but the practitioners should be rational in performing their duties.

#### **Fourth Estate of the Realm**

In democratic societies, there are three divisions of government set up to provide governance for the people who elected them into power. These are the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. As stated earlier, it was in the year 1787 when the phrase 'Fourth Estate of the Realm' was first alluded to the press by Edmund Burke, who first used it to refer to reporters in the British parliamentary debate on the opening of press reporting of the House of Commons. The media got this implicit elevation because of its capability to frame political issues in the society. The press is also referred to as the fourth estate of the realm because of its watchdog role over the other arms of government. The press provides counterpoint to the wrong activities of government. At the same time, the press drums support for any good policy of the government. This shows

that the media does not in any way struggle power with the government, neither is it an agent of government. Just as the judiciary is supposedly independent, the media (press) of any country should also be independent, as that is the only way it can secure the required level of boldness in performing its duties. It is on record that one move in intellectual history that birthed the four earlier normative theories of the press in the mid 1940s was the Hutchins Commission on free press (Christians; Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009)

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Meaning and Functions of the Press in a Democratic Society**

At the outset of journalism as a profession, the term 'press' was used to refer to newspaper journalism as well as the practitioners. But today, press connotes both journalists and print and other channels of journalism functions, such as radio and television. In addition to these, we now have the new media which has also given birth to another new concept known as citizen journalism. Through citizen journalism, anyone who has something to say or an opinion to express can do so without any form of restriction. However, a more common term now that is gradually replacing 'press' is 'media', hence; it refers to the institutions of mass communication as well as its operators and machines used. As Christians et al (2009) explain, "the press is now an institution, separate from the people, and it became more intelligent to talk about the public rights—the right to know, the right to free expression—rather than the press' rights. The press had responsibilities while the public had rights".

Nwosu (1993) explains that the press of any country is saddled with the arduous task of (a) Informing- ensuring that members of the public are informed of the goings-on in the world around them. The press do this by surveying the environment to find, process and disseminate information the public need, not what they want. By this is meant that the public is fed with the information that would help them make informed decisions. "Information dwells on new ideas, processes and fresh intelligence". (b) Education- the press also ensures that the public are educated on sundry issues or developments. To educate means to teach another how to do certain things (for example, how to register and vote during elections). The work of a journalist in this respect is similar to that of a teacher but while the teacher teaches a handful of students at a time, the journalist has a larger class; and his classroom is either the pages of a print media or the channels of either the television or radio. The education function of the

press can be captured in the following areas- cultural programmes, youth programmes, children' programme, science broadcasting, public affairs reporting among others (Nwosu, 1993). (c) Entertainment-The press through the media also entertains. The idea of entertainment was introduced to cushion the everyday harsh reality of life. The essence is to ensure that media content do not become boring to the audience. To entertain, therefore, means to effect lightheartedness rather than leaving the target (audience) wearing long faces always. 'Laughter is curative' which is why humans, through entertainment programmes on the media are made to, at least, temporarily forget their sorrows. Think of word puzzle, riddles and jokes on the pages of newspapers and magazines and games, storytelling and drama on the electronic media. (d) Socialisation-The press performs the function of linkage- i.e. linking or connecting the present generation with the past, at the same time, connecting the future with the past and present generations. This is done to ensure the transmission of cultural values. Culture as we know means the way of life of a people, encompassing their norms, mores, values and other cherished ideals. "The socializing effect can be understood through reports, and broadcasts with cultural slants" (p.122). (e) Opinion Vehicling- This is an important function of the press in any democratic society. The constitution allows the expression of opinion through the enunciation of the freedom of speech and media (press). For any society to positively thrive, members should be allowed this essential element of democracy, else, human society would be worse than Snowball's *Animal Farm* in which some animals were more equal than the others. The opinion vehicling function of the press gave birth to the agenda setting role in the process of marketing or promoting certain issues or developments into prominence, i.e. by the way such issues or developments are framed or repeatedly reported in the media.

### **Factors Hindering the Effective Functioning of the Press**

A society gets the press it desires. The different press or normative theories we are familiar with came about as a result of the prevailing governments at the places or countries where they operated. These are Authoritarian, Social Responsibility, Libertarian and Socialist-Communist press theories. "The normative media theory comprises the four classical press theories as enunciated by Siebert et al and the two theories later developed by media expert" (Okoro & Agbo, 2003, p. 19). These other later theories were propounded by Dennis McQuail to complement the existing four and fill the gap observed in them. According to McQuail,

developing countries had no place in the four earlier theories, in terms of their development priorities and participation in the democratic sphere of their countries hence; the Democratic-Participant media theory and Development media theory.

Unfortunately, nowhere in the world do we have absolute freedom. In fact, every freedom we enjoy has a caveat tied to it. Similarly, even the top democratic societies that could be said to be the champions of democracy have some kinds of cog in the wheel of freedom. As important as it is, "every healthy democracy requires a free and vigorous press and other organs of mass media and mass communication" (Belsey & Chadwick, 2006, p.4). In Britain, the media are restricted by the criminal laws of official secret, obscenity, blasphemy, sedition and reporting restrictions on Irish terrorists groups and their alleged supporters, by the evil laws of libel and breach of confidence; and by the judges' made law of contempt of court (Ibid, p.4).

A short comparative analysis will expose you to the fact that there is not much difference between the British press climate and that of America. It is simply a difference in constitutional provision, but they both have some leaning towards same ideology. Affirming this position, Jones (2009) writes: "America has been a place where difference in knowledge--like difference in wealth--was not a yawning chasm and where a reality-based press was, for all its shortcoming, premised on the belief that reality is something all Americans should know about" (p.222).

In Africa generally, there are different factors that have taken away freedom from the purported 'Press Freedom'. At a time when we thought that issue of military takeover (coup de 'tets) were over in the continent, the misdemeanors of politicians are now forcing the men in Khaki out of their barracks to seize power. If you like; call it greed, but the politicians themselves are more greedy in this respect.

### **The Challenge posed by Internet, Fake News and Post-Truth**

Journalistic practice is guided by professional ethics; and their major canons are truth and accuracy. Assured, the same cannot be vouched for the new media platforms, made possible by Internet via technology. With this came the concept of citizen journalism which has given anyone the license to post all kinds of scrap for the consumption of the public. This accounts for the reason why Elliot & Decker (2011) observe; "When

anyone can be a publisher, it can be hard to tell who counts as a journalist". News on the internet has no means of ensuring its credibility of the source or the authenticity of the information itself. In fact, the Internet has become a garbage bin where all kinds of refuse are dumped. Benedict as cited in Ngwokor (2019) explains that there are several reasons why news on the new media cannot be compared to those through the traditional media channels, because they lack: ethical standard; legal checkmating, professional touch, accuracy, objectivity and source credibility. Corroborating the aforesaid, Goldstein (2009) notes: "While the job of a journalist is to gather and double-check material; to ensure credibility, the Internet has created public pressure to disseminate information before it is corroborated, since the latter is a time consuming task; and the social media is inclined towards immediacy".

This attribute of immediacy is one factor of the on-line journalism that is responsible for much of the discrepancies observable with this method of newsgathering, production and dissemination. In this regard, Ciboh, Iyorkyaa & Torwel (2018) write: "these offer specialised production practices and new tools for disseminating information which are in sharp contrast with the more traditional ways of journalistic information". This also brings us to the question of fake news, a phraseology that has become so dominant in our press system. Over the years, especially during the post independence days that ushered in politics in Nigeria, the media has been used to drum support for their financiers' interests in both business and politics, attacking perceived opponents. Practitioners by so doing threw professional ethics to the dogs. Accentuating this ugly development is the emergent Internet technology providing opportunity for the posting of all kinds of fake news. Fake news is unfounded, incredible and unverifiable news. Such news has the huge capacity to do damage to the eco-system of a country. Dissemination of libelous information against innocent citizens and even government officials got to a crescendo with the birth of Internet technology.

The opposite of fake news, it seems, is truth-telling which in our society today has almost become a mirage. One plausible explanation for this is that prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, truth was not itself considered a problem to be solved, but rather where you arrived when you had solved your problem (Peters; Riders, Hyvonen & Besley, 2018). How independent, for example, is the judiciary in Nigeria? At the slightest provocation, judges would invoke the laws of contempt of court,

sedition, official secret act, obscenity among other obnoxious laws in their kitty, all targeted at the press.

### **How Free is Freedom?**

Although, the formerly 'Freedom of Information Bill'; as a result of the act of National Assembly is now an Act, that guarantees journalists access to public information which might be of interest to the greatest number. However, it was followed with so many hue and cries before it was passed into law, prior to and during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration. A functional press is one that is free to perform its roles in the society. That the press educates, informs, entertains, and mobilises is incontrovertible, but how and under what condition these functions are carried out is what need to be investigated. In Nigeria, the difference between military regime and civilian administration is not too clear. However, the press is expected to be socially responsible, but that does not mean it should be muzzled or gagged. This is because the importance of the press in any democracy cannot be overemphasized. Oloyede (2008) graphically explains the role of the press in the entrenchment of ideas in different climes around the world. According to him, right from inception, the press all over the world has always remained in the frontline of social, educational and political progress. The press has always fought poverty, oppression, deceit, tyranny as well as other antithesis of human existence, development and freedom. Continuing, Oloyede (2008) states that it was the American press that fought vigorously until independence was granted her by British rule in 1786. Similarly, the Latin American press was used to secure freedom from Spanish domination while Nigeria in like manner, gained her independence in 1960 by the sheer determination and doggedness of the pre-independence press.

Freedom itself means "liberation from bondage, exemption from arbitrary, despotic or autocratic control, independence: the state of being able to act without hindrance or restraint or liberty of action" (The Oxford English Dictionary). The question that remains to be answered is what is the degree of freedom journalists enjoy while performing their constitutional duty? In fact, an essential element of any democracy is freedom itself; and freedom is all encompassing-freedom of speech, worship, assembly, etc. "whether in speech or the press, journalistic freedom exists to support the dissemination of material necessary for active self- governance throughout the populace" (Elliot & Decker, 2009).



For journalists to be capable of effectively discharging their responsibilities, the climate of press in the country must exhibit a high level of friendliness built around freedom. One factor that drives journalists towards building of trust is inquisitiveness—that budding quest to know and feed society with information they need, not what they want, in the spirit of Public Affairs Reporting and Public Service Journalism. Goldstein (2007) avers that journalists are investigators who make effort to unravel the truth about events. By so doing, the journalist becomes both agent and effect of the system of dissemination of information as a result of which, his work both influences and is influenced by it.

There are several other factors that have remained a drab to the journalism profession and to the journalistic freedom in particular, such as the various obnoxious press laws that stare the professionals in their faces every now and then, threatening to take away their professionalism from them. News sources are not trustworthy persons either. They can give and decide to retrieve information within the shortest possible time frame. “It is often assumed that the initial answers to journalists’ enquiries are more accurate than ones formulated after the interviewee has had the chance to reconsider his answers” (Goldstein, 2007). How about the journalist’s own habits, inadequacies, mental unpreparedness and pressure from different directions that weighs him down and sway him away from the right path that would have led him to professional excellence? These and many others have been a hindrance to freedom of the press, particularly in developing societies such as Nigeria. After all, “from the global to the national level, we find that the issue of quality is still inescapable. “A free and vigorous press and other organs of mass media and mass communication are agreed to be among the essential ingredients of a healthy democracy” (Belsey & Chadwick, 2006).

Have we also given a thought to the true ownership of editorial independence? Critically examined, one would find that most editors today are ready to do the biddings of their employers since their employers’ political and economic interests must be protected in other for the journalists (editors) to secure their jobs. Remember also that every medium has its peculiar philosophy behind its establishment; and this must tenaciously pursued by the editorial team of the news organization. Hanlin (2006) writes : “In practice, editorial independence may be largely limited to day-to-day matters of style, content and the editorial budget,

rather than strategic decisions on political alignment or major issues, which are usually settled by the proprietor" (p.33).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Libertarian Media Theory**

The works of scholars and liberal philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Milton laid the foundation for libertarian media theory; and which was later renamed "Free Press Theory". The theory explains that individuals in the society and by extension, the press should be free to hold and express opinions without any form of restriction or censorship; since humans are rational in their thoughts and are endowed with the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong or truth and falsehood. This proposition is anchored on the "self righting process of the free market place of idea" (Okoro & Agbo, 2003). The theory takes the philosophical view that man is mentally equipped to be able to discern falsehood and truth; and therefore has the capacity to choose between better and worst.

The only way the media will enjoy the well deserved freedom is that it is totally free, hence; with the method of science, as one of the outcomes of metaphysics and epistemology of the era of enquiry, truth and knowledge were no longer the prerogative of a few people like the noble or aristocrats. Contrary to Plato's belief that what was truth or false resided with philosophers alone who were equipped with the mental capability to decipher such in human association; it was in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when this claim or assumption was challenged and found through empirical method (scientific process), that knowledge and truth were common to all men in search of same.

This theory is relevant to this study because we are in the era of freedom of information though, but journalists do not have access to most of the crucial information they need to serve the public effectively and efficiently. The public should have an unrestricted access to information through the media, and where the reverse is the case, journalists would only be barking without facts and figures, thereby making them a lame dog.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper which essentially is a position paper via descriptive approach, has reviewed several literature to substantiate its point of view. All cited

literature either affirmed or accentuated the position that though, press freedom is an essential ingredient of democracy but it has not been completely granted anywhere in the world. There are many laws described as 'obnoxious' that act as a cog in the wheel of progress of the much needed press freedom. Since man has that innate capacity and propensity to discover truth and falsehood in a free market place of ideas, the press should therefore be completely free. This is the only way the press can be at its best in performing its avowed responsibility.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations, if adhered to would help reshape the press-government relationship as a means of improving the performance of the press.

- (1) Government should henceforth relax its stranglehold on certain public information, to enable journalists serve the public better with information they desire to make right decisions.
- (2) Journalists themselves should be socially responsible, recognise the need for ethics in the practice of their profession to breed a healthy journalism for all.
- (3) Some journalists who are not properly and mentally equipped should be given refresher training through attendance of workshops and seminars to help beat them into proper shape.
- (4) Government should grant the much touted independence to the judiciary so as to enable them perform their duties creditably, as they would be free to determine cases only on their merits, not as they are instructed to do by a higher authority.
- (5) Similarly, government should see journalists as providing complimentary role to what government is doing for the society. At least, the media always report and drum support for every good policy of the government.

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