

# The Role of the Press in Nascent Democracy

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Date of Acceptance: Sep 16, 2016

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**Abstract:** This study tend to X-ray Media role in the democratic process to appraise the present electoral process, especially now that the 2015 General Election has just been conducted, supervised and declared. The press has emerged in Nigeria in the last one and half century for the dismantling of colonial rule; slavery, slave trade, the fight for political independence in 1960 struggle for Republican Nigeria in 1963; and democratic rule. Besides, the Nigerian press has served as the major pillar against military rule, coup detat, election rigging and political thuggery and brigandage in the first, second, third and fourth republic. Upon all, the press has acted as the self-appointed monitor of official life, recorder of public events and unofficial arbiter of public behavior. This study will give a retrospect look into the role of the media in the sustenance in Nigeria during the period 1999-2007. The paper x-rays the functions of the mass media/Press against the background of the theoretical framework of the paper, which was revived from the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, the functionalist theory and the Social Responsibility Theory. The paper discuss some of the fundamental ethical principles underpinning the functions of the mass media against the background of selected incidents of government repression of the media and how the fourth estate of the realm has survived the onslaught. The thesis of this paper is that although media practitioners contribute immensely to midwife and sustain democracy, they are hardly appreciated by government in terms of policy frameworks and pragmatic actions.

**Keywords:** Press, Mass Media, Democracy, Nascent.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Press refers to the print and electronic Media, which are organs of Mass Communication to convey news, ideas, opinions and views to a large heterogeneous audiences. The press can be interchangeably referred to as the Media. According to Burrell (1992), the press is better known as the Media- the plural for "medium " or means of conveyance and a reflection of its many components in the electronic age. But the press is not journalism.

The press according to Bond (1968), refer to the Media of journalism which include the newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets, radio, television and motion picture. And in this electronic age, the new Media refer to the World Wide Web which serve as super highway for online reporting of news and dissemination of information. Thus, newspapers, magazines, and other organs of mass Communication now serve their news on the web through electronic reporting, electronic mail, electronic interview, online pictures, online features, etc.

However, journalism is the practice of gathering and reporting of news. By the thought of David Dary (1973), "journalism will considered as the collecting, writing , editing and dissemination of news". And the journalists don't only report news, they also interpret news, disseminate opinions based on the news and at times entertains and mould people's opinions. As an institution, the press and journalism are interwoven. None can function without another. At least, there cannot be press without the news and there cannot be journalism without the Media.

The Nigerian media have been very vocal, vibrant and critical of government policies. The press exposes conspicuous cases of executive high handedness, mismanagement and mal-performance. Some people also finger the Nigerian press for escalating tension and instigating military intervention in politics. Uyo (2000:PP 3-6) posits that while the media fight to educate the public, government officials most often insist on the use of discretion in deciding what measured doses of

information the public should know. Besides, the Nigeria federation is fraught with structural abnormalities, which have culminated in inter and intra party struggles for power, lopsided fiscal federalism, resource control and executive legislative crisis.

## 2. THE NIGERIAN PRESS

The Nigerian press has no doubt come of age. It has developed with the new technology. From 1859, when it came on board as "IWE-IROHIN" newspaper in Abeokuta, it has developed with the political and socio-economic development in the country. Today, the Nigerian press is not only an industry, it is a business. It thrives in democratic dispensation through large sales and political advertisements. Though Aina (2002) lists 103 newspaper, 59 magazines, 67 radio stations, and 72 television stations as operating Media in Nigeria, the number has increased astronomically in the last 10 years of fledgling democracy.

We now have over 500 newspapers across the country which are daily, periodically, national, provincial and community based. The magazines have also increased to over 150, about 150 public and private radio stations, and 140 public and private television stations apart from the cable television channels.

The advertisement bill in the media industry now runs to over N20 billion in a year. The unfortunate thing is that most Media owners are not professional journalists, but mostly businessmen that invests in the industry. The editor is usually the gatekeeper of the press news mission. Besides, the Nigerian press operates as public trust whereby the general principles of truth, justice, fairness, objectivity, sincerity, decency, accuracy, independence and responsibility are upheld. As watchdog of the society, the press is an adversary of the government through partners in progress.

This points to the position of Burrell (1992) that, "the press and government are natural adversaries with different functions, and each must respect the role of the other". And this watchdog role has earned the press the honourific title of the 'FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM' after the three arms of government of legislative, executive and judiciary.

However, Jason (1996) notes that the public trust of the Nigerian press has been largely achieved through its historical antecedence in the dismantling of colonial government and military rule for Democratic self government.

However, there is no doubt that the Nigerian press is being regulated by law. Apart from the issuance of licenses to the electronic media by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and to pay annual fees to renew such licences, the public radio and television stations are not subjected to such controls and checks. Also, the newspapers are expected to be registered as business registration with the National Library and the Audit Bureau of Circulation.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian press remains non-ideological. Though some politicians established some Media concerns, it is observed that the Nigeria media have not affiliated to political parties, movement or organizations to the extent that they solely project the ideologies of such political groups.

Though Sunday Democrat (1994) perceives that Lagos and Ibadan media axis as vibrant, enterprising and Good, Haruna (1996) sees them as bias and unfair to the north in their reportage. But the Nigerian press has been consistent in the promotion of democratic values, peace, unity and stability in the country.

The Nigerian press However, has been largely metropolitan. This is because they are urban based. They in fact concentrate largely in Lagos, Abuja and Ibadan due to the fact that this is the economic nerve centre of Nigeria. The consumers of media information for political economic and socio-cultural reasons live in the urban centres, and it is only the elite that afford the cost of a newspaper and magazine which is between N100 to N200 per copy. And radio and television sets as well as access to the internet can only be affordable by the elite in the cities, while Nigeria is still an illiterate society with 60 percent living in the rural areas without through social amenities.

## 3. THE NIGERIAN NASCENT DEMOCRACY

The Nigerian democracy is nascent because we are just developing the culture of democracy. From Nigeria's political independence from Britain in 1960 to 1966 when we had the first military coup d'état on January 15, we had Democratic government. The military rule was in place for 30 years out of the 55 years of independence. The second Republic between 1979 and 1983 was shorthived by military coup which lasted till 1999 when we started the present democratic dispensation.

The Nigeria Democratic institutions have not been nurtured to stand the test of time and of harsh weather to sustain our nascent democracy. The democratic institutions as identified by the Farm House Dialogue (1992) are:

- \* A visionary and effective Executive
- \* A committed and responsible legislature,
- \* A forthright and courageous press
- \* An active and tolerant multi party system
- \* An independent and incorruptible electoral commission.

#### **Press role in democratic process:**

The press has its primary functions of

- \*Informing
- \*Educating
- \*Entertaining
- \*Interpreting public opinions
- \*Interpreting news
- \*Transmitting information from the government to the people and from the people to the government.

But beyond these primary roles in a democracy, Harold Lasswell (1969) itemizes the role of the mass Media as:

- \*The surveillance of the world to report ongoing events
- \*Interpretation of the meaning of events
- \*socialization of individual into their cultural settings.

#### **4. CHALLENGES FACING THE MEDIA IN SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY**

In this section, the discussion is not limited to the Obasanjo administration alone because there are a lot of cross-cutting issues concerning the challenges facing the mass media in Nigeria. Besides, some of these challenges have spanned decades and there is no hope that they will abated in the nearest future.

From 1979 to the return of the Military in Dec. 1983, several decrees and anti-press laws were made to curtail press freedom. Some of the laws include: Circulation of Newspaper Decree No 2, 1966; The Defamatory and Offensive Publications Decree No. 44, 1966; Newspaper prohibition of circulation Decree No 17 1967 and the Public Officers (Protection against false accusation) Decree No 11, 1976.

Others are the Newspaper (Prohibition of circulation) (Transfer of Certain Shares) Decree No 101, 1979.

From Dec. 31, 1983 when the military returned to power till the Buhari/Idiagbon regime, most of the anti-press laws were churned out. Some of them deserve a mention here. There was the Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree No, 1 1984; the State security (detention of Persons) Decree 2, 1984 public officers (protection against false accusation) Decree No 4 1984; and the Federal Military Government (Supremacy and Enforcement of Powers Decree No 13, 1984. This trend continued till the time of General Sani Abacha.

The Buhari regime promulgated the (Public Protection Against False Accusation) Decree No 4 of 1984. Under this law, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor were jailed for one year and the Guardian fined N50,00 on July 4, 1984. In October 17, 1989 Dele Giwa was invited by the State security service and accused him of gun running. Two days after, Dele Giwa was killed by parcel bomb. As if that was not enough, in April 1984, the News watch Magazine was proscribed for reporting the decision of the Cookeyled political Bureau. Decree No 6 of 1987 was later promulgated to lift the earlier proscription. Decree No. 35 of 1993, the Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree was promulgated to prohibit the publication of what government regarded as offensive.

This was followed by the promulgation of Decree No. 48 of 1993 while proscribed Concord Group of Newspaper. The Newspapers registration decree was an attempt by the Babangida regime to regulate the press by laying down stringent conditions. However, on Nov. 18 1999, Justice Ilori of Ikeja High Court annulled the Decree.

The military government went to the bizarre extent of prescribing death sentence for any journalist that published what the government perceived to be inciting. The Abacha regime clamped down on three privately owned newspapers: Guardian, Concord and Punch. When Babangida mounted the podium of power he repealed Decree No 4 which turned the press into a toothless bulldog. Within a year the Abacha administration descended heavily on the privately owned press. The Tell Magazine was prohibited from circulation and vendors who were found with the magazine in public were promptly arrested and detained without trial.

On September 10, 1997, Arit Igiebor wife of the Tell Editor-in-chief was arrested and detained. On November 10, 1997, Nduka Obaigbena Editor-in-chief of ThisDay was detained by security operatives. In 1996, the offices of the Guardian, the News were torched by government arsonists. Chris Anyawu, publisher of TSM, kunle Ajibade, editor the News, George Mba Senior Editor Tell, Charles Obi, Editor of defunct Classique all were jailed 15 years for making unbiased reports on the 1995 video coup saga. Niran Malaolu, editor of the Diet also bagged life imprisonment (Daramola, 1999: 43-44).

Journalists in performing their civic responsibilities are often accused of subversion, espionage and plotting coup. Bahuada kaltho-the kano State correspondent of the News was branded a terrorist and murdered in mysterious circumstances. Femi Adeoti, Editor Sunday Tribune and 40 others were charged with sedition in May 18, 1998. A journalist with the Champion was attacked and robbed in Abeokuta before Tunde Oladepo was assassinated. Indeed the press in Nigeria has suffered violence and journalists have passed through the crucible of fire especially under military tyranny.

Since the return to civil rule on May 29, 1999, the Nigerian press has not witnessed too much official harassment.” But there are few reported cases of isolated official high-handedness against the press.

The one that readily comes to mind is the brutalization of the Vanguard newspaper’s photojournalist by security operatives attached to the Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, early 2005.

The journalist was beaten to a state of coma and almost lost his life. However, lately, the government seems to be after again. Two journalists, Ghenga Aruleba and Rotimi Durojaiye of African independent Television (AIT) and Daily

Independent newspaper respectively, were arrested and arraigned in June 2006 for calling the recently purchased Presidential Jet a fairly used or Tokunbo (second-hand) jet while the Federal government claimed the jet is brand-new.

The irony of it all is that the journalists were charge under a moribund law, the Sedition Act, a law that has been declared null and void by a competent court of law, the court of Appeal, since 1983.

During military regimes, the menace of official reprisals under national security laws or punitive press code engenders a climate of fear in which journalists worked under self-censorship. Political power holders frequently invoke national security to justify restraints on the free flow of information and in extreme cases gag the press. But in spite of the severe suppression, the Nigerian media, have confronted the anti-press forces with bulldog tenacity and unwavering equanimity.

On few occasions, the press took sides with the” agents of darkness that tended to “destabilize” the country for their selfish end. On such occasions, the country and its people were the worst for it. For instance, the country and her people are yet to recover from the evil consequences of military intervention. Never again should the press allow itself to be used maliciously. As it was in the days of old, “the press in Nigeria should place more emphasis on its use for the public benefit”. Section 22 of the 1999 constitution unequivocally stipulates the obligation of the press. The constitution states: The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people (FRN: 1999: P.13). Section 39 of the 1999 constitution further states “Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference” (FGN: 1999: P. 22. The role of the media is undoubtedly in nation building. The constitutional responsibility of the media is to educate, entertain and inform. In pursuance of this responsibility, the media broadens and deepens one’s perspectives on matters affecting public interest. As the fourth estate of the realm, the media also serves as the mirror of the society. By

the same token, the media is accountable to the people, hence the barometer by which the public measures the performance of government.

#### **Statement of the problem:**

For the purpose of this paper, the terms mass media and the press are used interchangeably. In spite of the present-day mass media's propensity for sleaze, sensationalism and superficiality, they are still seen as essential democratic tools. Contemporary democratic theory appreciates the media's role in ensuring public officers are held accountable. Therefore the notion of the media as watchdog and not merely a passive recorder of events are widely accepted. Government, it is argued, cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill-informed about the actions of official and institutions. The watchdog press is the guardian of the public interest, warning citizen against those who are doing them harm.

#### **Research questions:**

1. What is the level of politicians involvement in the operation of the press?
2. Is Nigeria press now totally free from government oppression?
3. Is the freedom of the press being tamped upon by government?

### **5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework of the paper is anchored on the functionalist and social responsibility theories. The functionalist theory posits that "the society is an ongoing system of linked working parts or subsystems, of which the mass media are one, each making an essential contribution to continuity and order."

According to McQuail (2000:P.14), organized social life is said to require the continued maintenance of more or less accurate, consistent, supportive and complete picture of the working society and the social environment. There seems to be consensus that the Nigerian media has performed creditably in this regard.

The media are expected to monitor "happenings", especially activities of the government, and report same to the entire society. In addition, they are expected to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the society (See section 22 of the 1999 Nigeria Constitution).

In the words of Baran (2000:P.4), "Social Responsibility Theory" challenges media professionals' ingenuity to develop new ways of serving their communities. "They argue further that the "theory encouraged them (media operators) to see themselves as front-line participants in the battle to preserve democracy in a world drifting inexorably towards totalitarianism." To them, "by helping pluralistic groups, the media were building a wall to protect democracy from external and internal foes."

### **6. CONCLUSION**

The Nigerian press has no doubt performed excellently in the new democratic dispensation. It has not only sought relentlessly for the emergence of the democratic rule, as displayed during the last 2015 presidential election.

The Nigerian press must be free to serve as watchdog of good governance and civil rights. The press must not be politicized if it is to play its sophisticated role of nation building and promoting civil responsibility of citizen. The media possess a supremely constitutional role to play in the robust development of the country. To accomplish this sacred mission the press must transcend ethics or regional dominance to accommodate the pluralism that characterizes the Nigerian society. The press is the only institution that owes no allegiance to any political group. It therefore, behoves media practitioners to draw a demarcating line between absolute privileges and qualified in order to avoid malicious and vicious propaganda. The press must not be susceptible to the machination of the political class.

### **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The mass media, as an agency of socialization is indispensable in a nascent democracy such as ours. When properly harnessed, the press could serve as an instrument of promoting democratic values. In a society plagued by political thuggery, electoral malpractices and fledging democratic structure, occasioned by the creeping phenomenon of second tenure the press could within the confines of national interest, discourage sloganization, vicious propaganda and pursue

accuracy and fairness. With the proliferation of media houses, professional associations such as the NUJ, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) Nigeria Press Council (NPC) and the National Press Association of Nigeria (NPAN) have the responsibility of enforcing strict media ethics and encourage developmental journalism to consolidate the gains of our nascent democracy. It is the burden of the Nigerian press to sensitize the citizens to use their mandate to vote for candidates of their choice. At this crucial epoch in the political evolution of our nation it is the burden of the Nigerian press to improve the quality of government in Africa's in Africa's largest democracy. And no institution of government can abdicate this sacred civic responsibility.

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