

**CHALLENGES FOR THE NIGERIAN JOURNALISTS:
NORTHERN NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE**

A PAPER PRESENTED

BY

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Beginning from the colonial era when the first newspaper on record was published, the Nigerian media has, of late, witnessed exponential and rapid growth in terms of numbers and latitude to publish or broadcast. Suffice to say that this industry has witnessed the highest growth rate from 1999 to date than it did since before independence.

Whereas the federal and states governments strove to increase the number of their radio and television stations, they have largely shied away from the print media. In addition to its preeminence in the print media business, the private sector has also made its mark in the broadcast industry as evidenced by the existence of several radio and television stations across Nigeria. This growth gave birth to a lot of challenges in the areas of regulatory framework, professionalism and ethics, job security for media employees, personal security, sustainability for private media outfits.

Regulatory Framework

In 1994, DAAR Communications Group commenced radio broadcast with Raypower Radio in Lagos. This was the first test of the regulatory framework as far as private media is concerned. Until this time, the regulatory framework had no challenge as all the electronic media outfits belonged to the federal and state governments and as such the governments were the least concerned about the contents on the airwaves. Raypower Radio started with talkshow programmes

where citizens were given live and direct access to the airwaves and they were also interacting with each other. As the content became more popular, the radio station and its journalists as well as the listening public grew bolder and more creative. The National Broadcasting Commission, NBC, as a regulator began to adjust the National Broadcasting Code to keep up with the times. This culminated in the regular NBC Code Review Conferences where all stakeholders meet to consider review of the Code.

The NBC is generally regarded by the private operators as a body set up to keep non-government media in line on behalf of the government. In spite of the excesses and broadcast code violations of the government media, there is hardly any noticeable sanctions by the NBC whereas the same NBC comes down heavily with various degrees of sanctions on the private operators. Even though the spirit of the broadcasting code is to provide for a decent and level playing field for all and sundry, the selective application and enforcement of this code has created fear, concern and siege on the minds of the ownership and journalists in the private broadcast media. This is a challenge that the private media is still grappling with as their numbers are still much lower than government owned media outfits. Even though the private media is very vocal when it comes to NBC Code review meetings, it had always fallen short of influencing significant changes in the NBC broadcast code, because when it came to voting, its numbers are very low.

For the avoidance of any doubt however, regulation of the broadcast media industry is a necessary ingredient at this stage of our democratic and social development. It takes just a few seconds on the radio or few seconds on the television to injure another person or body gravely. Experience has shown that some degree of regulation is really required to maintain sanity in the industry.

Northern Nigerian Perspective

Private radio broadcast commenced in Northern Nigeria in 2003 with the establishment of Freedom Radio in Kano. At that time, Freedom Radio was the only private radio station in the area. The nature of content carried by Freedom Radio made the state and federal government uncomfortable, even though this content was generally within the framework of the code, the NBC came calling with a facial closure of Freedom Radio in 2004. That period was quite challenging for Freedom Radio and its journalists.

The then government of Kano state was leaning heavily on the NBC to tame Freedom Radio. Government attitude is understandable when one considers that top government functionaries were hitherto not used to hearing the government being criticized on the airwaves. This situation still pervades the broadcast media in Northern Nigeria as the private broadcast industry is just beginning to gain a foothold. With time, as the experience of Freedom Radio has shown, the situation will improve in other places.

The story of excessive regulation is very much different when it comes to the print media. Having survived several military dictatorships in the past, Nigerian newspapers are said to have come of age in terms of what they are able to publish. They have consistently resisted attempts for a clamp-down on any media house by any government agency to the extent that the government is wary of making further direct physical assault on any newspaper. The government set up the Nigerian Press Council with the hope that it may metamorphose into a control mechanism for the print media, but the media simply resisted it, ignored it and rendered it ineffective for that purpose.

Professionalism and Ethics

If nationalism and patriotism evoke strong reactions in Nigerians more than ethnicity and religion, Nigeria would have been a much better country. Add corruption and impunity to this mix, then, you will understand why it is difficult for the Nigerian journalist to maintain the straight and narrow path of professionalism and ethics. The way these primordial sentiments are deployed by the political class makes it quite challenging not only for the Nigerian journalists but other professionals. Just about a week ago, a young Nigerian journalist in Lagos was villified by his own colleagues and other community “leaders” for refusing to collect bribe and exposing same. Poor remunerations, lack of adequate training, community and peer pressure as well as the political class’ corruptive ways pose a great challenge to the journalism profession in Nigeria. Until and unless the Nigerian journalists begin to consider themselves as the custodians of public trust and behave as such, professionalism and ethics will

always be compromised. This situation is not much different in Northern Nigeria as in other parts of the country. Despite the aforementioned, there are many good journalists and public commentators who have managed to resist and overcome the negativities.

Personal Security

In Nigeria of today, security concerns play on the minds of everybody and the journalist is not an exception. Topmost is the security of life where people are concerned about their lives for just doing normal things like going to take a bus to work, going to the market, or just going about their normal day-to-day routine. This security threat comes to a journalist from government agencies, insurgents and the political class. When a journalist writes his report, these issues must be weighing heavily on his mind because he has seen journalists threatened with physical assault or murdered, media houses attacked by both security agencies and insurgents, Newspapers impounded by soldiers, radio stations heavily fined by the NBC as well as various methods of harassment. This security challenge has made it very difficult for the Nigerian journalist to carry out his duties according to the dictate of his conscience.

Job Security for Media Employees

This is a major sword of the Damocles hanging over the heads of mostly government owned media as well as journalists operating in such outfits. It may not be the government that issues a clear policy on the matter, but the fear of falling into the bad books of their owners makes this category of people slip into

self-censorship. They find themselves in situations where they have to sacrifice professionalism at the altar of expediency. Nothing kills the flourish of ideas, zeal and drive for professionalism than this kind of situation.

Sustainability for Private Media

Another serious challenge facing particularly the private media is the issue of sustainability and survival. In most locations where these media outfits operate the economy is so weak that it cannot reasonably sustain their operations. Prevalence of insecurity has also added to this pressure on the economy. Often times, media owners, editors and journalists are faced with this issue of survival encroaching into the realm of their decisions. The government, politicians and even private companies who are the main patrons of these outfits almost always try to extract editorial advantage when they are having commercial transactions with these outfits.

Conclusion

The problem facing private media outfits in Northern Nigeria and the country in general surely hampers growth and development of the media industry as well as the political and socio-economic well-being of Nigeria. Media stakeholders have a role to play in keeping this important sector ethically functional in spite of all the challenges. To succeed, all media stakeholders must resolve to change their ways

and make effort to encourage the willing participation of Newspaper readers, Radio listeners and Television viewers in a constructive way.

Thank you for your time.

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