

Discourse on the Social Responsibility of Journalists and Societal Development.

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Abstract

The paper examines the social responsibility of Journalists within the context of social responsibility and development media theories. The paper reveals a coverage pattern that does not favour societal development but the dominant class. Thus, the paper recommends a change from event coverage as prevalent today to trend-coverage, which will help in articulating the development needs of the masses.

Keywords: Development, Journalist, Media, Responsibility and Society.

Introduction

The mass media are intrinsic part of the society. They are necessary ‘evil’ in every society. From the beginning, the media have been seen as catalysts for development in the society. A society without the instrument of communication is more like a moving car with a blind driver. Though the driver knows he is moving a car, he does not know where he is heading to. Communication in a society is a necessity, if the society is to know where it is heading to. Fiske (1990) describes communication as “social interaction message.” Hence, without the media that provide mass communication, social interaction would be limited to the immediate environment of a people.

Institutions within every society (including the mass media) can only be relevant if its “economic, social and political ideologies and instruments are oriented to meet the essential needs of the masses” (Kamath, 1997). Social responsibility of the journalist, therefore, can only be relevant when he is able to meet the needs of the masses through the performance of his duty. Kamath goes on to say that the media are potent instruments, perhaps, second only to politics, for the socio-economic transformation of a people. Social responsibility of the journalist therefore, is necessary for the development of any society.

The Nigerian press is viewed as one of the freest in Africa (Ikiebe, 1996). Over the years it has been accused of varying ‘sins’ from sensationalism to junk journalism. Yet it has also been praised (albeit a section of the press) for enthroning democracy. This paper examines the social responsibility of the journalist to societal development. The development of any state is the responsibility of every citizen, however, the journalist has the social responsibility of ensuring that the populace is adequately armed with development information than can transform the lives of the people. The question is, how socially responsible has the Nigerian journalist been within the ambit of news coverage of development activities?

Social Responsibility Theory

The underlying principle of the theory is that the press should be free to perform the functions which the Libertarian theory had granted it to perform, but that this freedom should be exercised with responsibility. Therefore, the theory believes that if journalists cannot control themselves and act responsibly, then the government should control them. The essence of the social responsibility theory is that media have an obligation to their society, the journalist who enjoys freedom should remember that such freedom also carries corresponding responsibility (Okunna, 2002).

The social responsibility theory, therefore emphasizes on self-control and self-regulation by journalists and the media. This means that the mass media should control and regulate their activities internally; in such a way that they will act in socially responsible manner; contributing to public and societal good (Jakande, 1993).

The major premise of the social responsibility theory is that freedom carries concomitant obligations, and the media which enjoy a privileged position under the government is obliged to be responsible to the society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication. The theory allows free media without censorship but at the same time the content of the media should be discussed in public panel, the media should accept any criticism from the public or professional self-regulations or both.

The social responsibility theory lies between authoritarian and libertarian theories because it gives total media freedom on one hand, and external control on the other hand. Here, the media ownership is private. The theory moves beyond the simple objective reporting to interpretative reporting of resolving conflicts for a peaceful coexistence in the society for meaningful development (Curran *et al*, 1979).

Development Media Theory

This theory emphasizes that the media are important instruments for development in any society. It buttresses the fact that the media should actively participate in the development process of the society. The theory views development as futuristic and a means of improvement in the quality of life, it involves acquisition of knowledge and skills (Okunna, 2002). Development entails changes in the attitudes and ways of doing things. It offers advanced skills to individuals or group of individuals. It facilitates learning and presentation of appropriate content of enhancement and improvement in work ability and behavior (Daramola, 1988).

The media, under this theory, ensures that development brings about fundamental sustainable changes to any society. The media, under this theory, also associate themselves with the promotion of political and economic advancement to facilitate comprehensive building of societies.

The importance of the media in the introduction and sustenance of development in the society is undeniable. The media can be used to mobilize people at the grass root level for community development. The theory gives emphasis on how the media play up

issues in the society by making people to be aware of the need for development, just as programme content shapes people's perceptions by focusing attention on certain types of actions, the media determine the amount of attention to attach to a specific area or issues towards development (Defleur and Dennis, 1994).

Responsibility of Nigerian Journalist

The media are an integral part of the society. According to Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), the posture of the media in a given society is a reflection of what the society cherishes. Thus, they have come up with four theories of the press. One of these theories is the social responsibility theory. This theory tries to balance the public's right to know the responsibility of journalists to the society. It posits that freedom of the media carries concomitant obligations. Some of the tenets of the social responsibility theory include self-regulation, high professional standard, ensuring of media plurality and peaceful co-existence.

This theory may have bearing on this work, but the development media theory is more of concern to this paper; because it is of relevance to a developing country as Nigeria. According to McQuail (2006); cited in Ojobor (2002), the development media theory expects the media to join in the development effort of the government by articulating development programmes of the government and needs of the society as well as mobilizing the people for same. The media in this situation, are open to restrictions as the economic and development pendulum may dictate. Journalists and all media workers are to be involved in the process of information gathering and dissemination. The basic idea behind this theory is that development journalism will aid the development process of developing countries. Wherein then does the social responsibility of the journalist lie within the ambit of development journalism or theory?

Social responsibility theory as postulated by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) is that freedom comes with obligation. In essence, just as there is the freedom of expression and media, so attached to this freedom are the obligations of the individual as well as the media to the society which accommodates them. Some of the tenets of social responsibility theory include professionalism where truth, accuracy and objectivity reigns; the media must avoid anything that might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder in the society amongst others.

Therefore, if social responsibility theory enjoins the journalist not to influence the society negatively, why is it that journalism teaches that 'bad news is good news'? Often our newspapers are replete with stories that create fear in the minds of the people. For instance, media report on the recent 2019 elections made it look as though democracy was at the verge of collapse. Other reports that are often presented to the populace are on crime and robbery. If we should fault the media under the social responsibility theory, then they are even more guilty when we attempt to examine them under the searchlight of development media theory.

Development stories in the media are almost lacking. What pervades the Nigerian media today is junk journalism which has threatened not just social responsibility but development journalism. A scrutiny of the media will show that only stories of those people who can pay are flashed on the media. The articulations of the needs of the masses are usually presented with great epilepsy (Moemeka, 1991).

In a study carried out by Ndaliman (2003), on “Social Responsibility of the Nigerian Journalist and National Development”, it was established that national development was not a priority for Nigerian journalists. Indeed, the pursuit of the mundane made it impossible for them to consider reporting issues that enhance national development. The study revealed that media coverage was merely on issues that have no direct impact on the people and national development.

Findings from the study revealed that coming after the usual chase of advertisement, crime and insecurity stories were given prominence as most of the newspapers gave less than 10% to development stories. Critical sectors of the economy that have direct bearing to development were allotted meagre percentages. For instance, science and technology had 0.14%, social infrastructure 0.36%, industry 0.33%, education 3.35%, agriculture 1.72%, transportation 1.06% and environment 0.17%.

From the study, it is pertinent to note that the Nigerian journalist has not discharged his social responsibility to societal development. Fifteen years after Ndaliman’s study, the scenario still appears not better as much is expected from Nigerian journalists in terms of their social responsibility to the development of the society.

Methodology

This paper, adopts the content analysis technique, as appropriate for the study as it is a design by which the researcher seeks to determine the manifest content of published communications by systematic, objective and quantitative analysis. The essence of this design is to determine specific results and use them to explain situations requiring clarification and understanding.

The contents of some newspapers were examined. In doing this, the researcher made a random sample of some national newspapers in the months of September and October, 2018. The newspapers were randomly selected so as to give room for a wide range of interests as may be represented by different individual media houses. The different categories defining the news items were adopted from the different news items found in the newspapers. Out of the flood of newspapers in circulation, the researcher selected randomly two national dailies to represent a portion of the approximate number of national dailies. These were the Daily Trust and The Nation newspapers, from Northern and Southern Nigeria respectively.

The table below shows the percentage of the various news categories as reflected in the sampled daily newspapers.

Table 1. News categories in sampled Newspapers used in the study

S/N	NEWS ITEM	PERCENTAGE
1	Advertising	19.95
2	Political	15.16
3	Economic	05.32
4	Social Infrastructure	0.53
5	Industrial	01.33
6	Finance	09.58
7	Agriculture	0.27
8	Cultural	0.53
9	Transportation	01.06
10	Education	05.05
11	Sports	05.85
12	Privatization	0.79
13	Environment	0.27
14	Technology	02.4
15	Crime	10.37
16	Religion	01.59
17	Labour	01.33
18	Public sector	03.19
19	Health	02.13
20	Foreign news	08.78
21	Others	04.52
	Total	100%

Discussion of Findings

Findings have shown that the average Nigerian journalist is not particularly interested in development journalism. Indeed, the table shows that coming after the usual chase for advertisements (which, of course every medium needs for its survival) is political news with 15.16%. This high percentage of political news may be ascribed to the euphoria of our democracy coupled with the fact that elections are around the corner, yet, a closer look into the stories revealed a pattern: public speeches made by political leaders on either their ambitions or on a panacea to a problem in any aspect of life. Though lagging behind, dominant is the news on crime. These are stories, which portray the country as unsafe for foreign investment and tourism.

Similarly, a scrutiny of economic, finance, agriculture, education and social-infrastructure news equally revealed two main patterns thus:

First, economic and finance news stories were mainly from Annual General meetings where chairmen and directors of companies and banks declare millions or billions as profits and possibly express how much they intend to put into the business in the following year as well as the dividend to be issued. The question is: how does this really affect the common man?

Second, political leaders such as Presidents, Ministers, Governors, Legislators etc attend a particular function where a statement concerning a sector of the economy was made. It is these comments that are often reported as news to the populace. For instance, health

will only get the pride of place when the president declares open another roll back malaria programme or when he gives a speech on AIDS day.

The question is what has been happening to the people after the president had finished his 'showmanship'? Is malaria being actually rolled back? Our reporters do not find it necessary to report how many people have died from malaria. In the area of political reports, what is often reported are political speeches and parliamentary 'stunts' which are dressed in the toga of debates and decisions, what has happened to the avalanche of promises made in speeches and decision? Are the people benefiting from such promises and decision? What are the problems being generated as a result of these actions/inactions? These are some of the issues development journalists should articulate if they are to be seen as socially responsible to the society (Ebeze, 2002).

Concluding Remarks

Given the prevalent pattern of reporting being pursued by the average Nigeria journalist, it is clear that societal development is not a priority in their minds. What is particularly glaring in the Nigerian media is the reporting of events especially where a public official is in attendance. One cannot but agree with Becker (1983) when he said trends coverage is infinitesimal in the media. Most media report in Nigeria merely gloss over the real issues. The Nigerian journalist has not been able to represent the masses adequately. The Nigerian journalist can only be socially responsible to the people if he can constantly articulate the development needs of the society through trends coverage of events.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the paper proffers the following recommendations:

- i. Journalists should always take into consideration the interest of the masses in their reportage by highlighting the problems in the society.
- ii. Also, reports on crime and insecurity should be minimized to encourage investors to invest in the economy, this would positively affect the people through provision of employment and reduction of poverty.
- iii. The paper also recommends that areas neglected by journalists should be given priority to especially education, agriculture, science / technology and social infrastructure for societal development.

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