
Impediments to Objectivity and Professionalism in Journalism Practice in Nigeria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14035200>

Abstract

The study sought to investigate the impediments to objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice in Nigeria. Library research method was employed to generate data for the study. The study is anchored on social responsibility theory of the press. Findings revealed that news commercialisation, nonpayment of salary and ownership influence are impediments to journalism practice in Nigeria. Finding showed that news commercialisation has relegated the role of the editor to the background, therefore, allowing anything that is paid for to qualify as news. It was also discovered that money has become the criteria for news judgement. The implication of news commercialisation is that, it reduces the credibility of media organisations. Nonpayment of salary was identified as another factor that has negative impact on objectivity and professionalism. This is so because journalists, as a result of nonpayment of salary, have to result to collecting brown envelope (bribe) from news sources. The implication of brown envelope is that it makes the journalist do the bidding of the news source; that is, “he who pays the piper dictates the tune.” It was further revealed that ownership influence is also an impediment to objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice in Nigeria because both public and private media owners have a lot of influence on the media they operate. These owners have used their media organisations to: influence public opinion, .to suppress the truth, denied opposing views access to the media. Finding revealed that public media (government) are mostly used as instruments of propaganda for the government while private media owners are driven by different motives ranging from profit making, agenda setting to winning influence and political and business gain. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that objectivity and professionalism will continue to suffer so long as factors like news commercialisation, nonpayment of salary and ownership influence are left unchecked in journalism practice in Nigeria. It was recommended based on this conclusion that, news commercialisation should not be allowed to continue because, it is a threat to objectivity, professionalism, fairness and balance which are core to journalism practice.

Keywords: Impediments, Objectivity, Professionalism, Journalism, Practice

Introduction

Journalists in journalism profession are saddled with the responsibility of making information available to their various audience members. This information is intended to either keep such audience abreast with happenings around them or help them to make

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informed decisions. This means that such information is important to the target audience. The media also serve as watchdog of the society. This the media can do by bringing to the attention of the public issues that need to be addressed. Giving credence to the preceding point, Open Book Publishers (n.d) states that the media can ensure accountability by bringing to the attention of the masses important issues, such as corruption cases, that may not have been debated or addressed publicly. Another important role of media messages is that they can make government to take actions that are geared towards solving a problem that the media pointed out. Given the importance of media messages to audience members, there is need for objectivity and professionalism in the dissemination of such messages. The need for objectivity and professionalism stem from the fact that the media can sometimes be used to disseminate false messages and values that do not promote respect or messages that can result to crises. Objectivity and professionalism are needed to ensure that messages are accurate, fair and balanced.

Objectivity simply means saying it the way it is. It means the journalist does not need to be biased neither is he supposed to be subjective in his report. This assertion is echoed in Asogwa & Asemah (2012) who aver that objectivity is the dominant ethos of modern journalism. It underscores notions of fairness, accuracy and lack of bias in the media. A common saying in journalism education according to Leadingham (n. d) is that when a journalist interviews two persons and the first person says it is raining and the second person says it is dry, it is not just the job of the journalist to simply report what both sources said. It behooves on the journalist to find out what the truth is. This dimension to objectivity means that, is not just saying it the way it is but the journalist should make efforts to know why two people are saying different things about a particular thing. This effort of the journalist will help the audience understand better. Leadingham (n.d) asserts that it is the duty of the reporter to know more. This the reporter can do by double checking what both sources told him; helping the audience to understand why one source said it is raining and the other said it is dry; making sure that both sources are talking about the same thing and trying to find out the motivation, reasons and beliefs behind each source's statement.

This simply means that objectivity in journalism practice is not just reporting what the source said; it entails the reporter making efforts to know if the source is telling the truth. It behooves on the journalist to recognise the truth before saying it. Little wonder Ciboh (2011) asserts that telling the truth is the basis for journalism; journalism practice requires learning how to identify the truth and how to convey it in the least distorted manner possible. Journalism is a profession that values the truth. Reporting the truth is at the heart of journalistic enterprise and that journalist is morally obliged to deliver the truth to the public (Ciboh, 2011). Journalism is a profession that is saddled with the responsibility of making available to the audience accurate information. Such information can help the audience to make informed decisions. Objectivity and professionalism are required to disseminate accurate information to the audience. However, there are factors that tend to impede objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice. This study, therefore, seeks to find out what the impediments to objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice in Nigeria are.

Statement of the Problem

The journalist in the discharge of his/ her duty is saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that he/she delivers to the people (audience or readers) information that is true to a large extent. This is so because a lot of people depend on such information to make informed decisions. If the information from the journalist is inaccurate, it may lead the audience or readers into making wrong decisions, which will certainly have negative effects on those making such decisions and those affected by such decisions. This connotes that the job of a journalist is a dicey one, as such the journalist must be careful to ensure that what he /she is “dishing” out is the truth; hence the journalist needs to adhere to objectivity and professionalism, which is core to the dissemination of truthful information. However, objectivity and professionalism seemed to be challenged by certain factors that appear to oppose these principles of journalism. This study seeks to investigate these factors and the impact of these factors on objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on social responsibility theory of the press. The theory is an offshoot of the libertarian media theory of the press. The 1947 US Commission on the freedom of the press according to McQuail (1997) did more than lay the foundation for social responsibility theory. Similarly, Ojobor, cited in Okunna (2002) states that the theory originated from the work of the American initiated Hutchins Commission, headed by Robert Maynard Hutchins of 1947 which was a Commission on the freedom of the press. The theory emphasised phrases like “the public right to know” and the “public responsibility of the press.”

The theory emphasised that the media should serve the public and in order to do so, the media should be free from government interference. Social responsibility theory was set forth as the ideal way for the media to conduct business. It has become the standard for United States media practice. It has also set the standard for much of the currently accepted media ethics (Ijwo & Omula, 2014). This connotes that the theory introduced codes of conducts and ethics into journalism practice. This simply means that the media in the exercise of her freedom of expression should be guided by the code of conduct and of ethics. This is true in that what informed social responsibility theory of the press was that publishers during the libertarian era abused their freedom with impunity, media content then were characterised by character assassination and media owners then were subservient to big time advertisers (Ijwo & Omula, 2014). Ojobor, cited in Okunna (2002) opines that freedom of the press in libertarian era afforded the press so much unrestrained freedom that it became careless and irresponsible, thereby taking its freedom for granted. The assumptions of social responsibility theory according to McQuail (1997) are:

- a. Media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional standards.
- b. The media have obligation to society and media ownership is a public trust.
- c. Under some circumstances society may need to intervene in public interest.
- d. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
- e. The media should be free, but self- regulating.
- f. The media should provide forum for ideas.

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This theory is relevant to this work in that it calls on journalist and media organisation to adhere strictly to code of ethics or codes of professional conducts in the discharge of their duties. These codes exist to ensure objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice. However, today the codes of ethics and professional conducts appear to be threaten by, news commercialisation, nonpayment of salary and ownership influence.

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Objectivity and professionalism are core to the dissemination of truthful information to the audience or readers. This is in tandem with the position of social responsibility theory which states that the press should be free but be self-regulating. By implication, for a journalist to be objective he/she needs to adhere to the professional code of conduct. However, factors like ownership influence, news commercialisation and nonpayment of salaries that have found their ways into journalism practice in Nigeria and appear to stand against “everything” that objectivity and professionalism represent.

News commercialisation is an impediment to objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice in Nigeria. This is so because before 1986 the concept or the term ‘news commercialisation’ was alien to journalism practice in Nigeria. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the then Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida, was what introduced news commercialisation into the media industry in Nigeria. With the introduction of SAP, the subvention from government to government-owned media stopped, to survive, media organisations had to fashion out ways of generating revenue for themselves. The operators of media organisations then felt that, one way to generate revenue was to commodify news. Little wonder Ismail, Abba -Pali & Shem (2021) see news commercialisation as a situation whereby media organisations generate revenue by charging fees for news report that ought to have been aired or published free.

The implication of news commercialisation is that it reduces the credibility of media organisations. Ismail *et al* (2021) state that news commercialisation erodes the credibility of the medium. With the advent of news commercialisation, the criteria for news judgement are relegated to the oblivion. Little wonder Nwodu (2006) laments that the criteria used to determine news worthy events in the past are fast giving way to “cash and carry journalism.” The implication is that money is gradually becoming the criteria for news judgement, as such anything that is paid for can find its way into the media. Equally important is the fact that in the era of news commercialisation, the Editor has little or no power to edit the content of news items that are paid for let alone reject them. This is so because the gate keeping role of the editor has been taken over by money (the new editor). The implication is that “anything” that is paid for can be featured as news. This position is consented to by Ismail *et al* (2021) who assert that news commercialisation has led to a lot of compromise, news sensationalisation and half-truth. Another implication of news commercialisation is that it makes it difficult for the voice and opinions of the poor to feature in the media. This is true because news commercialisation encourages the constant voicing of the opinion of the rich while relegating to the oblivion the opinions of the poor who have news worthy events, but cannot pay for them to be aired or published(Acholonnum, cited in Ismail *et al* 2021).

Based on the foregoing it can be argued that news commercialisation has relegated objectivity and professionalism to the oblivion in journalism practice in Nigeria. This assertion holds true in that in the era of news commercialisation, money has become the news determinant, money is also the new editor. Money has taken over all the mechanisms put in place to ensure fairness, objectivity and balance. This position is echoed in Asemah & Omula (2013) who argue that “with the advent of news commercialisation, money is gradually taking over the role of gate keeping, editing and news determinant. The gate keeping function of the journalist is being relegated to the background, where money is involved. The journalist may lack the power to shut the gate to “news” items that are paid for. This is so because the person paying for the so called news to be published may want it published the way he or she wants it without alteration. This brings us to the popular adage: He who pays the piper dictates the tune (p,3).”

Ownership influence is another factor that poses an impediment to objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice in Nigeria. Ownership influence is when owners of media organisations tend to interfere with news content or what is published or aired as news. When a media owner is interested in an issue, he wants that interest to reflect in news stories about that thing. For instance, if the owner is interested in a political party or candidate, he would not want his media organisation to carry “negative” news about such party or candidate, there by suppressing objectivity and professionalism in his media organisation. This position is echoed in Project Reserve (n.d) which states that public media (government) are mostly used as instruments of propaganda for the government while private media owners are driven by different motives, ranging from profit making, agenda setting, to winning influence and political and business gain. Simply put, private media owners are mainly interested in propaganda or profit making. We are all “living witnesses” to the campaign of calumny by African Independent Television against Muhammad Buhari then Presidential aspirant or candidate of All Progressive Congress (APC). The documentary clearly depicted ownership influence and interest or inability of journalists to adhere to objectivity and professionalism. The said documentary was aired January 2015, in African Independent Television (AIT).

The preceding point is buttressed by Adelabu (2022), who conducted a study and found that both public and private media owners have a lot of influence on the media they operate. These owners continued Adelabu, have used their media organisations to influence public opinion, to suppress the truth, denied opposing views access to the media, peddle false information, character assassination and to settle political scores. Ownership influence as a global trend in the trajectory of ownership influence in journalism practice in Nigeria is as old as the history of the media (Adelabu, 2022). It is glaring that ownership influence has negative impact on objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice. Similarly, IProject (n. d) states that the pattern of media ownership has gone a long way in determining the level of professionalism in journalism practice. This means that professionalism in journalism practice in Nigeria is still at the mercy of media owners.

Nonpayment of salary and poor salary by media organisations (owners) were identified as problems that journalists in Africa and Nigeria have to contend with. A 30 year old journalist working with a Lusaka based community radio according to Kasama & Tembo (2022) notes that low salaries in the private media have led to the fall of

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professionalism in journalism. She notes that in some cases, media organisations do not give transport fare to their reporters when going to the field to cover events and such reporters depend on transport fares from the sources. This has given room for what most journalist in Nigeria today call “public relations (PR).” In this concept of “public relations,” the news source gives brown envelope (bribe or gratification) to the journalist(s) that come to cover events for the news sources. Brown envelope is an impediment to professionalism and objectivity in journalism practice. The preceding point is echoed in Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe (2012) who note that brown envelope syndrome has become a controversial issue in journalism practice because of its negative effect on professionalism and ethics, according to them brown envelope syndrome is one of the major setbacks to the growth of journalism practice in Nigeria. This is so because brown envelope is seen as an attempt to make the journalist do the bidding of the giver (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe 2012).

Doing the bidding of the giver of a brown envelope is not in tandem with the principles of objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice. This assertion is consented to by Kasama & Tembo (2022) who quoted the Chairperson of Zambia Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) as saying: “nonpayment of journalists salaries denies them objectivity and forces them to seek alternative sources of income, thereby, compromising media ethics (Parag,15).” Journalists now see brown envelopes as alternative sources of income. The fact that journalists are owed for many months or backlog of salaries is echoed in Okereke (2022) who cited Mr. Okogene, as saying, the *Independent Newspaper* in Nigeria was unable to pay its workers for sixteen months-between 2015 and 2016. After owing Mr. Okogene for sixteen months, he was sacked without pay; thus, non-payment of salaries is one major factor that has greatly eroded objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice.

Methodology

The method adopted in this study is the library research. This means that the study is based on secondary data. Library research according to IGI Global (n.d) refers to the act of using a library either in print or online, to find information which satisfies or answers a question. A research library is a library that contains in-depth collection of materials on one or several subjects. Research libraries are mainly established to cater for the research needs of researchers. Such libraries are usually stocked with authentic materials with quality contents. In research library, one is able to find scholarly and non-fiction materials such as journals, newspapers, periodicals and research projects. Note that in library research method, the researcher can also source materials from outside the library. The method is centred on the use of secondary data (information).The implication is that the study is based on consultations of theoretically related studies carried out by other scholars. Conclusion and recommendations were based on consultation of textbooks, journal articles and online materials.

Discussion

Professionalism is the conduct or qualities that concern a profession or people in that profession (Porcupile, 2015). The first objective of this study was to find out whether news commercialisation is an impediment to objectivity and professionalism in

journalism practice. Findings have shown that news commercialisation is an impediment to journalism practice because it has relegated the role of the editor to the oblivion. The gate keeping role of the editor has been relegated to the backseat. The editor as a gatekeeper was expected to always ensure objectivity and professionalism. But with the advent of news commercialisation, the reverse is the case. Giving credence to the preceding point, Ismail *et al* (2021) assert that news commercialisation has led to a lot of compromise, news sensationalisation and half-truth. It was discovered that with the advent of news commercialisation, money has become the new criteria for news value. This means that anything that is paid for can qualify as news, without consideration to objectivity, fairness and balance which are core to journalism practice. This is in line with the earlier submission of Nwodu (2006) who laments that the criteria used to determine news worthy events in the past are fast giving way to “cash and carry journalism.” This position is also echoed in Asemah & Omula (2013) who argued that “with the advent of news commercialisation, money is gradually taking over the role of gate keeping, editing and news determinant. It is pretty obvious that, news commercialisation is an impediment to objectivity and professionalism in Nigeria.

It was discovered that ownership influence has negative impact on objectivity and professionalism in journalism practice. This is so because when an owner is interested in a particular individual, organisation or news item, such owner tries to influence such news stories to suit his interest, thereby relegating objectivity and professionalism to the background. Adelabu (2022) conducted a study and found that both public and private media owners have a lot of influence on the media they operate. These owners continued Adelabu, have used their media organisations to influence public opinion, suppress the truth, denied opposing views access to the media, peddle false information, character assassination and to settle political scores. Finding has shown that nonpayment of salary also has negative impact on objectivity and professionalism. This is so in that journalists who are not paid mostly rely on bribe (brown envelope) which they usually collect from news sources. As a result of brown envelope, you find the journalists doing the bidding of the news source. This position is echoed in the submission of Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe (2012) who note that brown envelope syndrome has become a controversial issue in journalism practice because of its negative effect on professionalism and ethics. According to them, brown envelope syndrome is one of the major setbacks to the growth of journalism practice in Nigeria. This is so because brown envelope is seen as an attempt to make the journalist do the bidding of the giver (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2012).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Objectivity and professionalism will continue to suffer so long as factors like news commercialisation, nonpayment of salary and ownership influence are left unchecked in journalism practice in Nigeria. The following recommendations were made based on the findings of this study:

1. News commercialisation should not be allowed to continue because it is a threat to objectivity, professionalism, fairness and balance which are core to journalism practice.

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2. There is need to come up with legislation or mechanisms that can check ownership interest and influence in both public and private media and also ensure regular payment of salaries.

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