SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE MASS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social responsibility is an ethical framework and suggests that an entity, be it an organization or individual, has an obligation to act for the benefit of the society at large. This paper discusses the need for mass media to reconcile freedom with obligations to the society in which it operates. Implied in the notion is for the media practitioners to report truthful comprehensive, accurate accounts and representative picture of events and occurrences to keep the people fully informed, untrammeled by other forces outside the ethical prescriptions. The paper presented a critical evaluation of the application and constraints of the theory in Nigeria. The paper concluded that the media has been too hamstrung to fully equip the people with the right information to assess the performances of the leaders and make informed decisions in the participatory quest for nation building.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the mass media in any society can be understood from the fact that information is very vital in order to achieve economic growth and political progress. A society suffers when there is mismanagement, hoarding or absence of credible information. Lack of right information breeds rumour networking

with its counter productive effect on the society. Rumour is powerful and its transmission is fast and strongly effective on many people – especially on those with very weak internal control mechanisms. Thus right information shields the citizens from rumour and keeps them better informed in a quest for national transformation. Credible and quality information by the mass media helps the people repose confidence not only in the media practitioners but also in the leaders in order to promote legitimacy for the government. Thus, the mass media are vital weapons whose roles are paramount in providing understanding of different political, social, economic and cultural systems of the society. They make events and ideas common knowledge, which is crucial to the nation building.

There seems to be a continual unabated question revolving round the social responsibility of the media. Has the mass media truly been the cause of change in nation building in Nigeria. Even through media can aid rapid politicians are all agreed that the media scholars and development but they seem to be unsure. Is it the mess media that are slow and not awake to their responsibility or the system that hampers their effectiveness in this goal. This is a dialectical phenomenon worth knowing and to which it is hoped and this paper shall attempt to offer insight.

With the emergence of social responsibility Theory, came the general acclaims that the burning issues that trail the Libertarian concept would successfully laid to rest. But, somehow, it appears that social responsibility theory has ushered in greater challenges that what obtained in Libertarian Theory. Most of the controversies surrounding social responsibility of the press are a function of divergent viewpoints among the trio of the media practitioners, the owners and government. There are perspective differences among the three faces regarding the practice and application of the theory.

The mass media, particularly the press, is generally referred to as the fourth arm of the government. The role crystallizes the crucial importance of the media to the society. Not only do the media provide information needed by the citizens to take informed decision and to make contributions to the overall societal growth, the media is expected to play a watchdog role monitoring the activities

of the other arms of the government and communicating them to the people in a democratic society. Communication is an integral part of the society upon which all activities within a society are based. In other words, the society and communication are interwined. Thus, no society can exist without the role communication plays (Ravi, 2012).

Generally, the philosophy of social responsibility of the media is an extension of Libertarian philosophy is that the media recognize their responsibility to resolve conflicts through discussion and to promote public opinion, private rights and important social interest. Social responsibility is majorly premised on the ground that freedom carries concomitant obligations. While a responsible journalistic practice is a bulwark to social progress, the media still carries the burden to ensure that their activities are guided by ethical requirements at all times.

The society expects the media to serve the interest of the people. To this end, it is expected that media not only informs, but also educates. The society expects the media to play the role of watchdog, leadership to the community, empowerment and many other redeeming functions (Abubakar, 2012). Without prevarication however, Ravi (2012) clearly states that the media is obligated to the society that gives them freedom to operate. He emphasized that the media functions as trustee of the public and must promote public interest always. But to what extent has this line of obligation and expectation of the media received practical fulfillment? This paper seeks to examine and unravel the true situation

The notion of Social Responsibility of the Media

In other to comprehend the field of mess communication as determinant factor in framing the path of society is development, it behooves on one to analyze the discourse of ethics in the public space. Social responsibility in journalism is by nature collaborative and collective. Thus, Steve (2000) says it inevitably bears an impact upon those receiving a piece of information from the media which consequently makes the source – the journalist – responsible for its impact and consequences on the others. The journalist as the communicator is therefore, intrinsically linked to its audience hence the fundamental principles of the

media obligation to fulfill public interest which also lies at the basis of Social Responsibility Theory. The obligation imposed on the journalist by the social responsibility theory is to provide fair, balanced, objective information on different sides of an issue, which empowers audiences to formulate their own judgments and increases levels of truthfulness in reporting.

Corroborating the view above, Melisanda (2009) argues that social responsibility of the media from the perspective of a developing country like Nigeria entails that; the mass media are expected to inform the citizenry of what goes on in the government, which in a way, keeps rules check. Also, the media should be reporting on and prompting discussion of ideas, opinions and truth towards the end of social refinement; acting as a nation's bulletin board for information and mirroring the society and its people just the way they care, thus exposing the heroes and the villains.

From the notion of social responsibility, Melisanda (2009) posits that the press is accountable in four ways!

- To the audiences, to whom they owe correct news reportage, analysis and editorializing

- To the government to which they owe constructive criticism, a relay of popular opinion and adequate feedback from the populace.

- To the owner, to whom they owe the survival of the media organization as a business venture as well as a veritable source of education, enlightenment and entertainment;

- To themselves, to whom they owe fulfillment in their calling, satisfaction and an entire success story.

When any of these obligations of journalistic responsibility is shunted, accountability is seriously dented which automatically gives rise to distorted responsibility as it is currently the case in Nigeria

Basically, responsibility of the media to the government as Ford (1991) avers, is in line with what Melisanda (2009) points out as we stated earlier. The media responsibility is to monitor and report truthfully the actions and inaction or activities of the government, commending and criticizing objectively where

necessary. Responsibility of the media to the government entails holding the government accountable to the public and keeping her in checks against exercises or in the case of glaring failure.

However, in Nigeria milieu, the successive governments seems to have their own versions of media social responsibility by redefining it in terms of what goes in tandem with protecting their failures and presenting favourable sides to give a false picture of reality to the public, the actual expectation of the public from the media in fulfilling the notion of social responsibility is grossly undermined and side tracked. This thus constitutes a travesty of the concept of media responsibility.

Emergence of Social Responsibility Theory

The origin of social responsibility of the media can be traced back to a key landmark of the report produced by the commission on the freedom of the press usually known as the Hutchins Commission. Ford (1991) says the projects was requested in 1942 by the founder of Time Magazine, Henry Luce, at a time when it was believed First Amendment freedom were being increasingly threatened by the rise of totalitarian regimes throughout the world. Black (2008) avers that the regimes felt that considerable check mating measure must be placed on the activities of the media against their perceived excessive freedom the Libertarian press theory ostensibly accorded the media. The libertarian theory is premised on the notion that man's wisdom will always ensure the victory of truth in the open battle with falsehood and so it was pointless to bridge the press in whatever guise. The is Idemili (200) points out provoked anomalies and inconceivable excesses I media activities, manifesting in unwholesome lies, arrant misinformation, character assassination, defamation and slanderous publication.

Against this background totalitarian regimes were up in arms to bridle and gag the press. Alarmed by the indeterminacies of the extent the media could be clamped down with its dire consequences on the society. Henry Luce felt something must be done to define the role and extent of the press freedom. The social responsibility theory gained prominence in the late forties against

Encyclopedia Britannica funded a commission comprised a group of eminent scholars under the chairmanship of Robert Hutchin. The commission published its first report titled: A free and responsible press. Thus, the Hutchine's commission was the first to enumerate in a coherent and systematic manner the social responsibility of the press. The report ever since has provided a blue print for many subsequent studies on press responsibility and ethics.

The commission while deliberated for four years comes up with an encompassing prescription for the extent frowns at the basics premise of the Libertarian theory that man's wisdom will ensure victory of the truth in the open battle with falsehood. Rather, it said that, not only is man a trail and often irrational being but the world which he must seek to understand is increasingly complex. Thus, the commission resolved that a truthful, comprehensive account of the news was a yaedstick for societal or declines (Idemili 2008).

Social Responsibility and the Mass Media

The mass media practitioners hold a major stakes in every democratic society. Hardly can any society that lays claims to operating a democratic governance achieve its sets goals without the involvement of the mass media. This explains why the press has been rightly described as the Fourth Estate of the Realm (in British Concept). The concept implies that the journalistic play a vital role in the governance of democracy as the other three braches – the Executives, the Legislature and the Judiciary. This concept is however not to be understood to mean a relationship of compromise. Rather, just as the first three arms of the government are in principle, interdependent but in reality, checkmating each other, the press too, is expected to play both complementary roles at the same time a watchdog role over the three arms.

The journalists ought to act as the watchdog on behalf of the public in the society. In other words, the journalists are expected to stand apart often in a adversary stance. Affirming this view, Adeyanju (2005) says that the press is expected to play the role of an early warning system against major troubles that loom on the horizon of the nation or a community. Adeyanju stressed that when the press has the clear concept of its role and it is allowed to play the role

effectively, there will be few problems of responsibility. However, Kadiri (2009) regrets that in the actual world of journalism, there seems to be multiple concepts and interpretation of responsibility of responsibility of the media, a situation which attracts the contradictions surrounding responsibility of the media.

Fundamental to the conflicts interpretation of responsibility is government incessant attempts to manipulate the media into playing the role of mouthpiece rather than a watchdog role. In so doing, the government often try to redefine the concept of the press freedom using such subterfuge as national security or public safety. By this, the government and their agencies ensure that the journalist is only free to report issues to the public as long as their reports are not in conflict with national security or public interest. Ironically in attempting to gag the journalists ostensibly to protect the public interest, the interest of the public become endangered or destroyed out rightly.

Freedom and responsibility of the media are closely related to each other. In spite of the close relationship between the concepts, responsibility of the media should not be used as a decoy to prevent the practitioners from reporting the unusual and the exceptional if such reports are of genuine public interest. Corroborating this views, Campell (2004) remarks that the freedom of the press is not merely a right of the publisher or journalists but also the public right to know all sides of an issue of public interest. He stressed that a free press is essential for democracy, adding that it was the reason freedom of the press had been and established in most countries of the world through hard and difficult struggle.

In spite of the truism pertaining the freedom of the press as bulwark to democratic governance, Kadiri (2009) reports that political powers and governments in many countries especially the developing countries have tried to stifle and suppress the media using all kinds of subterfuge in order to achieve their preconceived objectives. According to Kadiri, various negatives strategies including licensing, censorship and prohibition are often used to compel the press to operate within the countries of their (government) version of the responsibility of the media

Notwithstanding however, liberal thinkers still believe that responsibility of the media should not be misconstrued to mean a device by which to gag or intimidate a journalists from carrying out their constitutionally prescribed roles in a democratic society. Media freedom and social responsibility represent a synergy meant to keep governments and their officials on toes for effective discharge of their obligations to the people. The journalists act as watchdog of the government as well as purveyors of information meant to edify and keep public fully informed about issues and occurrences. In other words, journalists should be alive to and reflect interests and trends in the society. The responsibility of the media is to set agenda through accurate and truthful information for public debate by making inquires on matters of the public interest and publishing the findings for the public to be fully informed.

Information – truthful and accurate is power; it is a conduit pipe for a meaningful socio-economic development and catalyst for political transformation of democratic governance. Accurate and balanced information unlocks doors to new ideas, which in turn help the citizenry better equipped to take informed decision for the progress of the society. To function well in this direction, the public needs to trust the media by presenting verifiable, true, accurate and balanced information. In this Vein, Dare and Merrill (2002) counsel the media to at all times properly by ensuring that their reports are factually balanced and accurate. The highest evidence of social responsibility and the media lies more with a total devotion of upholding public trust.

It may holds sways in some instances that journalists often betray the public trust by developing a negative attitude of "good news is no news" resulting in the neglect of developmental activities or the positive sides of life. It must however be pointed out that governments often are the major culprits in the convoluted interpretation of responsibility. This consequently gives rise to adversarial relationship whereby the journalists are regarded as obstructive and a clog to socio-political stability in a society.

In their bid to report the truth about government failure as part of their watchdog role, the journalists are often seems as acting irresponsible. This way, the government and the media see responsibility from crossing perspectives. To the

government, the journalists act responsibly and in line with public interest and national security when they support their failures. When the journalist cover the gross direction and inefficiency of the government; when the truthful accounts, but which may be considered embarrassing are either under-reported or suppressed.

The implication of this kind of reportage as Kehind, Tinusa, Muhammed and Raji (2015) point out, is that it impairs the effectives of the media as social institution of public trust. The reason being that this kind of negative journalistic practice leads to what Munageker (1996) in Kelinde et al (2015) calls tyranny of topicality. Kehinde et al (2015) indicts the system of news coverage as a major culprit in the compromised journalistic practice where over familiarity often gives rise to compromise between the journalist and the government officials who are not to cover up their misdeeds and short comings leading to indulging the reporters to compromise.

Reporting public affairs as Best (2005) argues, is more like advertising, portrayed rather mere background noise in the perception of the public. What happens at the centre of power is given and excessive, imbalanced publicity, contrary to the requirement of social responsibility which prescribes accurate, balanced and truthful dissemination of information to the public and holding the government accountable through construction criticism and depiction of their failures.

Social Responsibility Theory: Application and Constraints

The press is generally believe to have certain obligations, but the extent to which these obligations are fulfilled remains a doubt in developing societies owning to several impediment. In the democratic system, the media is expected to regulate and directs it practice voluntarily without external coercion or subversion. While carrying out its task, the media is expected to be guided by good practices and management, with its social obligation to the public in sharp focus. This entails being objective and free from bias.

This forms the background to the concept of social responsibility of the press which had evolved over a long period of time. Political free thinkers, proponents

of libertarian views and those who fostered a democratic spirit like John Milton had a profound influence on the growth of the notion of social responsibility. The press is a child of liberty and freedom, free speech and expressions. Clearly, this has often been cited as a pattern and framework for many nations which resolved to opt for a free press. The United States of America particularly saw freedom of speech and expression as sacred phenomenon and so it was regarded non-negotiable. This provided an impetus to the movement towards press freedom, which the First Amendment fully encapsulated.

Prior to this time, the press was widely faulted for being socially irresponsible. The commission thus exhorted the press of its obligation to project a representative picture of the constituent groups in society. Ford (1991) reports that the true condition and aspiration of ethnic and religious minorities and the rural people.

If man is remain free, he must by reason instead of accepting passively what he hears, sees or feels. Therefore, the alert elements of the community must goal him into exercise of this reason. Without such goading, man is not likely to be moved to seek the truth. The languor which keeps him from using his gift of reasons extends to all public discussion. Man's aim is not to find the truth but to satisfy his immediate needs and desires. To this, Akpoveta (2010) says it is the press that must be more alert and keeps the public informed as stressed that an informed populace is the cornerstone of democratic societies.

But given the convoluted interpretation of social responsibility of the media as given by most developing democracies in the world particularly in Nigeria it stands to reason as to hoe the press can actually ensure an informed populace. Nigeria is one of the developing democracies where the notion of social responsibility theory has been twisted, leaving only a war, version and interpretation of the theory to guide media practices and reporting. What the governments and their agencies consider and see as social responsibility of the media is quite antithetical to the spirit and soul of the concept of social responsibility as envisioned both by the Hutchins's commission report and the theory that emerged from the report.

To the government in Nigeria, responsibility of the media is not what keep them on their foes to discharge their responsibility creditably to the citizenry. It is not when the media engage them in constructive criticism of their policies and misdeeds as advocated in the concept of social responsibility theory. It is not accurate reports about what governments or their agencies want to keep away from the knowledge of the public. Nigeria, as well as other developing democracies harps on social responsibility of the press in manner that actually leaves the hamstrung. The press is only deemed socially responsible when its reports cushion their psyches in an apparent attempt to gag the media. With this as framework for defining the application of social responsibility theory, it is unrealistic for the press to successfully ensue the populace is well equipped with right information.

Many factors impede the application of social responsibility of the media, particularly in Nigeria. Adeyanju (2005) points out that besides governments and their agencies, the owner and managers of the media often determine which persons, which facts, which versions of these facts should the reach the public. Consequently, the tenet of social responsibility theory which makes is incumbent on the press to provide truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the days event is subverted.

The media can only provide a forum for the exchange of comments and criticisms, providing a representative picture of the constituent groups in a society when governments and owners of media establishments genuinely key into and accept the true version and application of social responsibility. Short of the expectation from the key deciders in a social systems, it is impossible for the press to discharge the responsibility of presenting and clarifying the goals and rules of society as well as providing full access to the days intelligence as envision in the tent of social responsibility theory.

Given the change socio-political and economic circumstances in Nigeria. The question that a Nigerian journalist may grapple with what should be the social responsibility theory of the media. Although, the concept of social responsibility theory leaves no ambiguity as per the role of the media practitioners, but the social milieu in Nigeria which is replete with counter

forces and which often dictate to the media their own version of social responsibility has redefined the understanding of the concept

For instance, the first requirement of social responsibility of the press as elucidated by the Hutchins commission is to provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's this requirement demand that the press be accurate; identifying facts and reporting them for the citizenry in order for them to be well informed. This is also to ensure that there is an established fidelity to the public interest in news gathering and reporting.

However, Omenugha and Oji (2008) report that this requirement of social responsibility of the press has been turned upside down. Reporting a truthful and comprehensive account of the day from the view point of the government official, their agencies as well as some interested individuals and organizations is the surest way to incurring the ire of the powers that be. The media by so doing is deemed irresponsible and working against the interest of the society. Consequently, what applies is nothing but a travesty of social responsibility.

Against the dictate of social responsibility theory, media outfit owner often teleguide newsgathering with covert motive for political weapon; thereby distorting facts and suppressing the truth to meet the needs of the powerful. These has become the rule rather than exception. Affirming this view, Petterson and Willis (2005) aver that social responsibility of the press has been distorted to reflect a curious sort of objectively; a kinds of spurious reporting which glorifies half-truths, incompleteness and incomprehensibility. To be objective and accurate in news reporting or interpretative journalistic writing seems like a big minefield riddled with dire repercussions.

The second requirement of the press in light of social responsibility theory is that media should serve as forum for the exchange of comment. The undertone in this requirement is that the press should carry present views contrary to the view points of the government and their agencies, so long the views express the general interest of the public. Important divergent view points should be given attention and presented and not merely those views which governments agrees with. This explains why former managing editor of the Lovisville Timess, Norman Isaac (1953) posits that the one function of the journalists have that

supersedes everything is to convey truthful, accurate information about events in the society to the public. He emphasized that it was basically for this reason that the freedom of the press was given. Norman noted that keeping the society from knowing the truth about events is the society amounts to arrogance and backwardness. Freedom of information and people's to information are basic rights of the people. However, in Nigeria a number right to the knowledge of the truth.

CONCLUSION

Social responsibility theory of the media was envisioned and postulated a redemptive measure against the perceived excesses of Libertarianism. The theory aims at arming the press and place values on the society by providing accurate and truthful information in the society within the bounds of the law. This is the media responsibility to the society. Even though the social system within which the media operates is a decisive determinant of how they operate, however, many developing nations including Nigeria have subjected this belief to warp interpretation and accordingly used it as basis to justify intrusion and suppression of information from the media.

In a democratic society, the media is expected to regulate the practice voluntarily, guided by its code of ethics devoid of external coercion or subversion while keeping its social obligations in sharps focus. This, to all intents and purposes formed the background to the evolution of social Responsibility Theory encapsulated by Hutchins Commission, which gave birth to the theory. Underlying the notion of social responsibility is that the press, with obligations, is a child liberty, freedom of speech and expression. This is a sacred and non negotiable phenomenon. Social responsibility theory was not envisaged to be a weapon of censorship of the media by any factor through details of access to information; rather it enjoins the media to reports facts accurately within the ambits of responsibility and decorum.

But given the twisted interpretation of social responsibility of the media by leaders in Nigeria which leaves only a warp version of the theory to guide media operations, truths, accuracy and factual reporting which the public needs have

be become casualties similar to what obtains in authorian theory. Successive governments and their agencies harp on social responsibility only in a parochial manner leaving the media hamstrung in their obligation of the society. Social responsibility of the media within the purview of Nigeria leaders receives a nod only when the media reports are teleguided to cushion their psyches, cover up their misdeeds or dereliction.

Consequently, application of social responsibility of the media in Nigeria has been defined by objective political and economic interests with the later coming from private media owners. Public interest as primary consideration behind the theory is relegated to a point of annihilation. This leaves the people ill-equipped with the right information to assess the performances of the leaders and to make informed desertions in the participatory quest for nation-building.

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