

EXPLORING THE EXTENT OF PRESS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Press freedom has become one of the major challenges of Journalism practice in the world. This paper explores the factors militating against press freedom in Nigeria using some relevant examples. The researcher used the qualitative method of research using secondary data comprising of books, journals and other scholars opinion for the discuss and analysis. The study is embedded on two theories out of the normative theories i.e the authoritarian and social responsibility theory. The study reveals that there are a lot of factors in Nigeria that impedes or militates against press freedom ranging from secrecy, legal pressure, direct censorship and force among others. Findings also reveal that Nigerian press freedom is a paradox and only exist on paper i.e. on constitution but not in practice. The research recommends that since press freedom is granted in the constitution of Nigeria, there should be statutory backup and in order not to hinder press freedom, journalist should be allowed to have access to government sources and records so long as it will not bring chaos to the society at large.*

KEYWORDS: *Press Freedom, Journalism, Journalist, Militates, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Press freedom has become one of the major challenges of Journalism practice in the world. Media practitioners have faced a lot of stampede on their operations making them to either go out of market or stop practicing. Press freedom does not have a straight jacketed definition; it is the right of the mass media to communicate ideas, opinions and information. It has to do with the right of the media to criticize the political, economic and social institution of the country (Asemah, 2011). According to Onagoruwa (1985), press freedom “is the right of the press to publish without being subjected to any form of intimidation, molestation or blackmail”. To the above scholars press freedom connotes the liberty to publish news or information without formal or informal restraints. But press freedom is a term solely defined but not practiced at large. That is why the paper seeks to explore press freedom in Nigeria using referenced documentation.

But does press freedom really exist in any part of the world? Press freedom exists in some part of the world but not 100%.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Press Freedom

The definition of press freedom varies from authors to authors as mentioned above it has no straight jacketed forms. According to Sambe and Ikoni (2004, p.11), “press freedom focuses its attention

on the unrestrained liberty to write or publish information for the consumption of the public”. Agee, Ault, And Emery, (1979, p.29) define press freedom as “freedom to print without prior restraint”. This implies that press freedom is the liberty given to a journalist to be free to write without fear or favour. A Journalist has the ability to burrow into the ills of the society thereby making the public aware of happening in their environment. It is vital for the mass media institution to be entrusted with the accountability of observation of the environment through the presentation and analysis of the happenings in society. Indeed, it is hard to picture a modern society without the press.

THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

Theories are a concept/phenomenon that helps in clarification or explanation of certain issues. The theory used for this study is rooted from the normative theory as it discusses how media operate in different countries. Two theories will be taken from the normative theory which is the authoritarian theory and the social responsibility.

Authoritarian Media Theory

Authoritarian media theory is generally seen as the oldest of the press theories, and it dates from the 16th century. It is rooted from the concept of absolutism, in which “acknowledgment of the truth” was given to only a section of people considered to be elites and wise, who are able to exercise leadership in top-down format. Authoritarian media existed to service the government be it private or public and were hindered from criticizing government and its functionaries. This implies that authoritarian press can be categorised under form monarchical government in which the press was subjected to state power and to the favour of the ruling class. Therefore, the theory is of relevant to the study because the study looks at press freedom as it unfolds in a society. As stated above the media in authoritarian societies are not free to exercise their rights but only used as the mouth piece of the ruling government.

Social Responsibility

This theory postulates that the media can be used by anyone who has an idea to express but they are forbidden to invade private rights or disrupt social structures. It emphasizes the freedom of the press and places responsibility on the media practitioners to abide by certain social standards. It opposes media regulation but believes that the press is automatically controlled by community opinion, consumer protest and professional ethics. It calls on the media to be responsible for fostering productive and creative “Great Communities” and that media should do this by prioritizing cultural pluralism- by becoming the voice of all the people – not just elite groups or groups that had dominated national, regional or local culture in the past. It also points out that the media, in carrying out their obligations, must adhere to the highest ethical standards. (Baran and Davis 2003:109). This theories are of relevant to the study as it is well known that no country has 100% press freedom therefore, every freedom of the press depends on the country the press is situated. The saying he who pays the piper dictates the tune comes to play. This research explores press freedom in Nigeria, stating the factors that impedeS press freedom in Nigeria.

HOW FREE IS NIGERIAN PRESS?

There are a lot of factors in Nigeria that have militated against press freedom. According to Momoh (2002, p.10) restrictive media laws could be said to have actually taken roots in 1903 with the enactment of Newspaper Ordinance of that year and the sedition Ordinance of 1909. As Momoh

recalled, perhaps the most notorious press gag law was the 1917 Act.”. Nwanne (2014), adds that no doubt, these laws were put in place to curb the perceived “excesses” of the local press and sufficiently frighten them to desist from attacking the Colonial Administration. Tellingly, most of those Draconian laws have remained in Nigeria’s law books because the new rulers who took over from the colonialists were not interested in abrogating them. Not unexpectedly, therefore, in 1964, this earlier Act was amended and has been the basis of anti-press laws in Nigeria. The first civilian administration under Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister enacted the law. If the civilian administration was not particularly media-friendly, it was even worse with the subsequent military administrations, each of them trying to outdo each other in an effort to put the media in its “rightful place”.

Against this backdrop, this research discusses some factors militating against press freedom as outline by Asemah (2011) as follows:

Legal Pressure: even though press freedom is granted in the constitution, there is no statutory backup in Nigeria. Journalist do not enjoy press freedom as the constitution counteract each other for instance section 39 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution qualifies and tactically curtails freedom of expression and of the press. Subsection two of section 39 places prior restraint on the ownership of the media for the exercise of freedom of speech particularly on the broadcast media.

Chigbo, (2007) observes that section 39 subsections 3 validates and justifies any law made for the purpose of preventing disclosure of information received in strict confidence while in the service of the state in government. Section 45 of the constitution further limits the exercise of freedom of expression and the press. *“This shows that even though press freedom is guaranteed in the constitution of Nigeria, it is only a mere say as there are techniques used by government in Nigeria to dodge what has been guaranteed in the constitution”*.

Economic And Political Pressure: The economic and political pressure in Nigeria makes some newspapers or radio station most especially government owned to publish things in support of the government by so doing *the definition of press freedom is defeated*.

Secrecy: Secrecy in Nigeria limits the right of the people to know, by hindering the press from having access to government sources and records. We have government agencies or officials evading journalist so that they cannot get information about government activities.

Direct Censorship and Force: The government uses forces, violence and harassment to restrict press freedom. There are many instances when Journalist were physically brutalized in an event to cover a report. We have instance of Dele Giwa who was killed via a letter bomb because he was expressing his view on public issues.

REASONS FOR PRESS FREEDOM

Many wrongly believe that press freedom is all about introverted freedom of journalists to print or air whatever pleases them. But that is not so the real situation is that journalist are professionals saddled with the responsibility of gathering, analyzing and presenting of news of the day to the people. Therefore Journalists require commendation and a bit of respect. Given this much responsibility, Oji (2006, p.424) makes clear argument on the need for freedom of the press. He postulated that the press requires freedom for the following reasons.

- That the media must have constitutional safeguards to enhance the discharge of its duties.
- That the media must have access to information;

- That the media should be protected to protect and prevent the disclosure of sources of information;
- Call for the stipulation of freedom of the press in the text of nations' constitutions and that it should be preceded by a statement of the obligation of the press;
- Where there are sedition laws in the world, clauses which do not see truth as a condition for the free practice of journalism should be expunged and
- In places where the constitution or any act cedes the power to grant a media license to any government official, such as Section 39 of the 1999 constitution and replicated in the National Broadcasting Commission Decree of 1992, should be expunged.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

There is no part of the world where you have 100% press freedom. This is because, there are external and internal bodies which often regulates press activities in Nigeria such as legal, economic, political, secrecy and direct censorship/force restrict the full performance of press in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the aforementioned discussion the researcher proffer the following recommendations.

- Since press freedom is granted in the constitution of Nigeria, there should be statutory backup in. Journalist should be allowed to enjoy press freedom.
- In order not to hinder press freedom, journalist in Nigeria should be allowed to have access to government sources and records as long as it will not bring chaos to the society at large.

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