

NATIONAL SECURITY AND JOURNALISM PRACTICE-EMERGING CONSIDERATIONS FOR NIGERIAN JOURNALISTS

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ABSTRACT: *National security has in recent times become a planetary concern with the security beat even more daunting for journalists. This has therefore necessitated the need to streamline the ethical issues involved in covering national security with a view to averting the disclosure of information that may create bedlam, cause damage and endanger national security. The nature of study was thematic and this necessitated focus group discussions among select journalists and officials of some law enforcement agencies in Nigeria. Discussions however revealed that most journalistic reports tend to blur the line of distinction between the right to know and the need to know. This was equally found to be borne out of a marketing concern by newspaper proprietors to have headlines that will sell their papers. Conversely, it was also found that some government officials, in the guise of national security, overtly classify information bits that ought not to be classified. Drawing from the foregoing, it was recommended that journalists should develop checklists that will ensure that national security reports must predominantly be devoid of technical and location details that are capable of putting lives and programmes in jeopardy. It was further recommended that news reports on national security must be truthful, accurate and must also be backed by a compelling need to reveal it in an ethical manner in contradistinction to wanton disregard.*

KEYWORDS – Ethics, Information, Journalists, National, Security

OVERVIEW

The national security beat is indeed a very difficult terrain that requires tenacity, resourcefulness and tact. Covering this beat goes beyond the rule of thumb journalism and embraces an interdisciplinary appreciation. This is so because contemporary events, that border on global significance, have lent importance to national security reporting bearing in mind the global threat to security / political stability, the war on terror, nuclear arms proliferation and arms control.

It is also important to note that in order to report effectively on national security; reporters need to be equipped with the expertise and background understanding of critical security issues. Dominick (2011) opines that the debate on ethical considerations in the security beat “will go on as long as reporters cover wars, and journalists will continue to struggle with their ethical obligations to their profession and to the audience” (p.62). The essence of this paper is therefore preconceived in the foregoing. The premise however is hinged on a semantic appreciation of key concepts- national security and journalistic ethics- dovetailed in a continuum with a view to aligning concepts and precepts within operational parameters.

THE SEMANTICS

Romm (1993) has operationalized national security to mean “the continued ability of a country to pursue its internal life without serious interference”(p.16). The McMillan Dictionary sees national security as bordering on the protection or the safety of a country’s secrets and its citizens. The Thesaurus streamlines the italicized words as synonyms for national security- *spying, espionage, intelligence/ counter intelligence, snooping* etc.

National security is sustained through the use of economic policies, political power and diplomatic dynamics. In terms of semantics, national security has been encompassed to include precursors like narcotic cartels, multinational corporations, natural disasters as well as sectarian insurrections and insurgencies.

At the epicenter of any discourse on national security is the issue of classified information. As defined by Black (1984), classified information is sensitive information to which access is restricted by law or regulation to particular groups of persons. Every government operates a hierarchical system of secrecy that engenders classification of documents based on their level of sensitivity i.e. top secret, state secret, confidential, restricted etc.

The inference however that is the unwarranted disclosure of such information may create bedlam, cause damage and endanger national security. The foregoing however forms a hotbed of manifold tension between the role of the press to inform and the responsibility of the government to ensure the well being and security of its citizenry. This no doubt is the premise upon which the marriage between the government and the press otherwise referred to as the marriage of strange bed fellows is contracted. While the press thrives on openness, government operations are predominantly shrouded in secrecy. This poses a perplexing scenario with two manifest schools of thought – pro free -flow of information and anti free -flow of information.

Madison (1968) an acclaimed proponent of free flow of information opines:

... Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both (P2).

Moyers (2010) on the other hand, in his narrative on how President Johnson signed the FOI Act in 1966, espoused that;

...LBJ had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the signing ceremony. He hated the thought of journalists rummaging in government closets and opening government files, hated them challenging the official view of reality. He dug in his heels and even threatened to pocket veto the bill after it reached the white House... He relented and signed the “damned thing” as he called it”(p.27).

According to Moyers, “he signed it and then went out to claim credit for it”. Freedom of information, in full practice, has been seen to be irksome because FOI released records

sometimes expose governments to a level of probing and investigation which is unwelcome or even embarrassing.

In moderation, however, President Lyndon Johnson highlighted a proviso when he noted that “a democracy works best when the people have all the information that the security of a nation permits”.

Emphasis no doubt is on what the security of a nation permits and this is relative. This however demands great appreciation and sensibility as expressed in role prescription. The cardinal role of the press is to inform, educate and entertain and not to rock the ship of the state. This however balances out in the spread sheet of what is right and acceptable versus what is wrong and unacceptable bringing to fore the framework of ethical consideration that border on truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, fairness and public accountability.

The word ‘ethics’ is derived from the Greek word *ethika* and it represents a set of moral principles, attitude and norms that usually characterize a people or system. Deductively therefore, ethics refers to the characteristic attitude of a professional body towards what constitutes the morality of work. This goes beyond the question of how one feels about his profession but also how one carries out his responsibilities and borders on such characteristics as honesty and accountability.

Since ethics help govern the dynamics of a profession, their inherent benefits can indeed not be overemphasized. These benefits have been streamlined according to the context of this paper as under listed:-

- i) They provide a profession with a framework for understanding the concepts of right and wrong
- ii) They help simulate a ready understanding of how to react to certain situations long before they occur.
- iii) They serve as legacies through which members of a professional body are able to show others the correct way to act and behave under given conditions
- iv) They engender a knowing- doing disposition among members of a professional body.

In view of the distillation of the semantics of national security and ethics, a reporter’s dilemma is therefore subsumed in the context of national security versus ethical expectations of the journalist in terms of crises. The concern of this paper is therefore preconceived in the foregoing. It is also worthwhile to note that these issues are further subsumed within the notion of learning effects which McQuail (2010) considers quite critical. According to him, “there is a widespread belief that exposure to portrayals of violence leads to a general desensitization that lowers inhibitions against, and increases tolerance of violent behavior” (p431).

THE DISCOURSE

While it is important to recognize that government business needs to be conducted in the open so as to make government records open to inspection, there is also an overriding need to protect national security and diplomatic concerns.

News organizations serve as important watchdogs and their mission is to scrutinize what the government does; particularly if government conduct raises constitutional questions. The overriding job of the journalist according to Black (1984) is to cover the government and its use of power and authority. Conversely, the journalist needs to take a close and careful look at what may be published to assess whether there is anything in the story that could significantly undermine national security.

In this context, however, journalistic assessments ought to be based on an evaluation whether the information would really endanger lives or whether officials are seeking to withhold publications for reason of policy, partisanship or embarrassment.

National security in some contexts and applications sounds so awesome. According to some scholars, the things they call national security may overwhelmingly have nothing to do with national security because there has always been the tendency to be quick to over classify but slow to declassify. This brings to fore the question of whose responsibility it is to classify documents while for the journalist, there is a thin line between the right to know and the need to know.

The issue of information management comes in here because many government officials assume it may not be worthwhile to relinquish national security to the whims of the press, headline seekers or persons whose agenda may be super ordinate.

It has also been argued that national security interests continue to enable governments to withhold information or override the constitutional or legal protections that should be accorded journalists.

Ethical considerations in the face of national security must always compel the journalist to develop a checklist. This checklist may necessitate the underlined questions:-

- 1) How far/well can the government officials who classify documents be trusted? In other words, how far can those who urge journalists not to publish be trusted?
- 2) How secret is the secret?
- 3) Can the story be told in a way that minimizes risk?
- 4) How would the story jeopardize national security?

As a rule of thumb, reports most times must be devoid of specific details, technical details, location details that are capable of putting lives and programmes in jeopardy.

Also as a corollary, the information must be truthful, accurate and backed by a compelling need to reveal it in an ethical manner in contradistinction to wanton disregard. This no doubt frowns at sensationalism.

The sensitivity of national security is absolute and can never be compromised because only a fool would believe that rivals/foes do not make use of intelligence provided in the mass media. According to Miller (2010), the lives of our troops and those of our allies in harms way are not “collateral damage” to a mythical people’s right to know”.

The synthesis of this discourse is however predicated on section 12 of the FoI Act which states that a “public institution may deny an application for any information the disclosure of which may be injurious to the conduct of international affairs and the defence of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The disclosure of which could also be reasonably injurious to the security of penal institutions”.

The proviso on the other hand balances the argument

... Notwithstanding anything contained in this section, an application for information shall not be denied where the public interest in disclosing the information outweighs whatever injury the disclosure would cause.

The inference therefore is that the common denominator, in the issue of national security versus ethical expectations of the journalist in times of national crises, is public concern. The ethical expectation of the journalist is to protect that public interest. Anything short of this is outright betrayal that no doubt will engender monumental tragedy. No amount of economic gains (media sales), journalistic prize (Pulitzer) or showmanship (gallantry) can compensate for this.

POST SCRIPT

Deductively, in as much as journalists have the right to publish, that right must be guided by the ethical consideration that some things also do not need to be published sometimes. The dynamism of the society is such that the situation must always necessitate the act. This is the beauty of information management in the face of the well being and security of the citizenry.

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