Journalism Education and Practice in North-East Nigeria: Ideal and Reality

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Abstract

The current state of Nigerian journalism practitioners and practice faces a significant imbalance between the ideal and reality. Several factors contribute to this issue and require further examination. These factors include ownership and control affecting editorial independence, the presence of undertrained or poorly trained journalists, and a poor attitude towards ethical standards and professionalism. These challenges are prevalent not only in the country as a whole but also specifically in the North-Eastern region. Hence, this raises questions about media ownership, journalistic independence, and the ability of media organizations to accurately report on political and social issues. The paper employs a conceptual method to examines existing research in the field and draws conclusions based on the evidence provided. In addition, it considers the challenges facing media organizations in the region and suggests strategies for overcoming these difficulties. The study concludes that to ultimately enhance the quality of journalism practice in the North-East region of Nigeria, there must be responsible media education and practical training for promoting professionalism and responsible journalism. The study also emphasizes the media's role in rebuilding societies after crises and suggests that journalism educators should have practical experience to gain respect for the profession.

Keywords: Journalism,Media Education, Professionalism, Responsible Journalism, North-Eastern Nigeria

Introduction

The journalism landscape in Nigeria had steadily been expanding along with the expansion of media education institutes and outfits (Oso, 2012). However, whether the geometric increase in the number of journalists in the field, and the rise in the number of journalism training centres in the country have had a corresponding effect on the quality of the practice, remains a subject of academic and professional discourse. There appears to be disconnect between the ideal, responsible journalism and what is practically obtainable in the fields of both training and practice (Odunlami, 2014). While a number of factors have long been attributed to the imbalance between the ideal and the reality of Nigerian journalism practitioners and practice, some of such factors need to be further interrogated. Foremost among these factors include ownership and control that affects editorial independence, undertrained or poorly trained journalists, poor

attitude to ethical standards and professionalism (Odunlami, 2014; Pate, 2010; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020; Pate, Yar'aduwa & Aondover, 2020) allof which represent the reality of the current journalism practice in the country at large, and the North-Eastern region specifically.

In developing societies, ownership presents a major constraint in journalism practice. Media professionals struggle to balance public interest and ownership interests (Appiah-Adjei, 2020; Galtung & Mari, 1988). In emerging democracies like Nigeria, ownership interests often outweigh professionalism (Ikechukwu, 2004). Political news tends to dominate headlines in both emerging democracies and the Western world, raising questions about how stories are selected. Ownership interests seem to play a significant role in determining news headlines, as many media organizations are owned by politicians or governments controlled by political parties (The Democratic Governance for Development Project, 2010). This also applies to global media outlets like BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and others.

The extent to which ownership interest creeps into news content varies significantly along the line of prevalent democratic maturity relative among countries of the world. Pate (2010) averred that the degree of influence is more pronounced in democracies as the type of Nigeria where political jobbers and politicians extort and manipulate public opinion through the media. Thus, they are anxious to manipulate the mass media for their selfish personal interests.

Another major problem confronting journalism is that of defining whether it is a profession or not. A profession should have a strict entry point that must be strictly followed before qualifying to be admitted as the case is with medical and legal professions. This difficulty in defining whether journalism is a profession or not stems from the fact that the doors of journalism are open to virtually all comers wishing to join it, although the Nigerian Union of Journalists code stipulates a diploma in journalism or mass communication as the minimum entry requirement into journalism, (Pate, 2014). However, many people without that stipulated minimum requirement are still being admitted or allowed to practice even if he or she is a quack. According to Momoh (2005), journalism is a profession and a body of knowledge obtained both in theory and practice which can qualify a person to be a professional and also a registered member, he or she is also being guided and monitored by a code of ethics.

This paper discusses the incongruence between the ideal and the reality of journalism practice in the North-East within the perspective of the nexus of media education, professionalism and responsible journalism. These three operational terms have been contextually defined to provide a guide into issues raised in the paper. First, the phrase *media education* simply implies imparting the requisite training, skills and expertise to practicing journalists and future journalists to enable them to practice journalism effectively. Second, *professionalism* according to the Advanced Learners' Dictionary means "the high standard that you expect from a person who is well trained in a particular job." Additionally, "it is a great skill and ability." Third, *responsible journalism* is "having the job or duty of doing something or taking care of somebody/something so that you may be blamed if something goes wrong."

Literature Review

Journalism Practice in Nigeria

Journalism in Nigeria just is well entrenched within the socio-political milieu. In fact, any meaningful analysis of Nigeria's political evolution would recognise the invaluable role of the media in state and nation building, from pre-independence, to post-independence and beyond (Oso, 2012). The practice has rapidly and steadily grown in the midst of myriads of challenges, mostly due to systemic and structural problems bedeviling several other institutions in the country (Oso, 2012; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). One major challenge of the Nigerian journalism practice is in the area of training, the very system that is supposed to produce practitioners. In comparison to Nigeria, the trend of journalism recruitment exercise in the United States and other Western nations is normally carried out first through an internship which gives the student journalist the opportunity to acquire practical industrial training, akin to what our Students Industrial Training programme was intended to achieve before the so-called Nigerian factors crept into it. Many journalists in these countries eventually pick up their first appointments through these kinds of internship programmes.

In spite of having studied what can be termed "operational journalism" in schools, colleges or universities, the interns in US and European media organizations are usually accorded the first opportunity of doing practical attachment to cut their teeth in the profession and eventually offered jobs after their internships, if vacancies exist. In Nigeria however, people who are offered journalism jobs get it on the basis of having read mass communication, journalism or other social sciences or even knowing the media managers or owners. Journalism, like other

serious professions, needs a lot of practical training before someone is well enough to be registered as a journalist.

It is disheartening to note that in Nigeria whereas medical students spend a great deal of time training first during clinical and, second, during houseman-ship, but the contrary, journalism students in Nigeria who did not study "operational journalism" are not exposed to adequate practical training or internships before they are released by their ill-equipped schools to the industry. Certainly, when a doctor operating in the theatre makes a mistake, it is only the patient that loses his life while when a journalist makes a mistake, like in the case of Isioma Daniel of ThisDay newspaper in 2005, many lives are lost, (Pate, 2014).

Journalists in Nigeria today are accused of being irresponsible in their conduct, partly because they lacked responsible media education from their educators and other media training institutions, thus lacking the desired mental orientation needed to catapult the progress and development of Nigeria and its people. Therefore, objectivity, ethical standards and morality are what constitute responsible journalism (Pate, Yar'aduwa&Aondover, 2020).

However, the practice of journalism appears to have a serious setback partly because of the poor performance of the media educators in the northeast to effectively teach and train students in both theory and practical aspects of the profession. Students must be taught how to professionally inform society about issues and events around them. Therefore, media educators and those aspiring to practice journalism must learn to report developmental issues so as to unite and inspire people to contribute and participate in the development of society (Pate & Ibrahim, 2020).

Students must also be taught not to say, write or publish any libelous or defamatory statements about a person, group or organization that will invariably lead to claiming of damages from the parties involved or even to the loss of reputation. If we are serious about getting responsible journalism practice in the Northeast, we have to be serious with professionalism which can only be attained through proper media education. By implication, no responsibility can be taken in journalism practice if there is no professionalism and professionalism is only attained through proper education of either the practitioners or those aspiring to practice journalism.

It is however important here to say that in journalism the drive, energy or passion for the profession is not enough to be successful in the discharge of journalistic

responsibility. In the old days, men with the necessary passion and drive for the profession got themselves jobs as journalists and educated themselves as they practice the profession. They were largely self-taught. Today, with competition over the few openings available to aspiring men and women to practice journalism profession, many wise among them acquire the necessary pre-education skills before applying for the job.

Ideal Situation in Journalism Practice

Under this subheading, the basic and professional requirements of what constitutes ideal or responsible journalism are highlighted. Responsible/ideal journalism embodies journalistic practice where media professionals freely observe and adhere to social, legal and professional chores at a given time in a defined geographical entity. Responsible journalism maintains a high degree of standard, ethics and professionalism which compels journalists to provide truthful, unbiased and undistorted information to readers, listeners and viewers, (Adaja, 2012). Again, responsible journalism defends issues of public importance. Similarly, responsible journalism further demands that journalists demonstrate a high sense of morality and character as custodians of societal values and culture. In 2013, William averred that, "I believe that no one should write as a journalist what he would not say as a gentleman." Responsible media education is strategic for installing the right psyche among upcoming journalists to prepare them to create positive change in the lives of individuals, groups or society, in line with the new developments and innovations in the media industry.

Mass media in society are saddled with the responsibility of serving and protecting the rights and interests of the people by giving them accurate, factual and true information (Pate &Kurfi, 2022). Ethically, responsible journalism is achievable only through factual accuracy and verification of details, devoid of biased interpretation (Black & Whitney, 1983). By implication, the concept of responsible media education' requires that the media educators themselves be responsible and conscience of the grand task of educating prospective media workers for the country. In addition, they must be abreast of the developments in the media world.

In this context, therefore, media educators and the society that owns mass media institutions make conscious efforts to produce competent journalists that will serve society better not proprietors' personal sentimental and conflicting interests, (Mu'azu, 2012). To achieve the desired goals, media educators must integrate their

knowledge with practical experience to ensure responsible imparting the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to media and journalism students. This way, media practice in the northeast can be strengthened to better the future of the region.

Similarly, (Odunewu, 2000), sees journalism as a profession that involves special training theoretically and practically especially one that needs a high level of responsible education. Furthermore, a profession is an occupation requiring advanced education and training involving intellectual skills. The business of identifying and sourcing newsworthy events and eventual transmission of news requires responsible education, professional, practical training and technical skills. Therefore, for aspiring journalists to live up to their expectations in society and acquire appropriate knowledge and skills to perform these functions, they must be properly schooled in the art and science of journalism, (Adaja 2011).

Responsible journalism requires professional theoretical and practical training, and professionalism is achieved through responsible media education from reputable institutions in Nigeria. This equips students with a realistic understanding of modern journalistic complexities on local, national, and international levels.

To ensure competent and ethical practitioners in Nigerian journalism, the following steps should be taken by journalism and mass communication training institutions, practitioners, and government policy and regulatory bodies:

1. **Hire competent and experienced journalism educators:** Preference should be given to educators with basic requirements and substantial industrial experience. Experience in journalism is crucial for understanding and respecting the sensitivities of the audience, as demonstrated by a past incident in Nigeria.
2. **Provide practical journalism training to educators:** Media educators need regular refresher courses to stay updated with industry innovations. Technology has significantly impacted journalism, and educators must keep up to date to impart relevant knowledge to their students.
3. **Engage veteran journalists as visiting lecturers:** Seasoned journalists should be hired as visiting or guest lecturers to share their field experiences with students. It's important to have educators with both academic qualifications and practical industry knowledge.
4. **Encourage media educators to take part-time journalism jobs:** Just like doctors, media educators should be encouraged to work part-time in

journalism. This hands-on experience is vital as journalism relies heavily on real-world exposure rather than just classroom teaching and textbooks.

5. **Equip studios and laboratories:** Mass communication and journalism institutions should update their studios and laboratories with modern equipment. Having well-equipped facilities is essential for practical training and preparing future journalists for the technology-driven media landscape.

Real Situation in Journalism Practice in NE

The prevalent situation of journalism in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria is not essentially different from the general picture this paper painted in the foregoing, describing the overall Nigerian experience. In Nigeria, for example, non-adherence and enforcement of the ethics guiding routine operations of journalists contribute, in no small measure to corrupting the minds of 'self-acclaimed' professional journalists contrary to their counterparts in developed societies. The challenge remains whether journalists, proprietors and managers of media organizations are adequately educated and willing to adhere to the principles within the ongoing democratic experiment thus, the ethical, moral and professional obligation is to provide the public with accurate and balanced reporting that does not distort or suppress information (This Day Newspaper 2001, p.15). The truth is that no adherence to these laid down rules is observed.

Regrettably, the journalism sector in the Northeast just as it is more or less in Nigeria generally, jettisons noble professional values of objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balanced reporting, instead, media reports are beclouded with unprofessionalism, sycophancy and yellow journalism (Pate, 2011). Journalists in Nigeria today are accused of being irresponsible in their conduct, partly because they lacked responsible media education from their educators and other media training institutions, thus lacking the desired mental orientation needed to catapult the progress and development of Nigeria and its people. Therefore, objectivity, ethical standards and morality are what constitutes responsible journalism (Pate, Yar'aduwa&Aondover, 2020).

Most journalism training schools in the Northeast of Nigeria lack functional Television and Radio studios, Public Relations and Advertising resource centres are hardly well-equipped to practically train students and arm them with the requisite knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of the industry. It is obvious that the relevant mass communication training institutions available barely engage students or give them the needed practical skills to practice very well so that they (the students) can think or act rationally and professionally (Odunlami, 2014;

Pate, 2010; Pate & Ibrahim, 2020). This has remained the bane of journalism practice in the North-East sub region of the country.

The education is biased, ineffective and not sufficient enough to give students professional quality training with a broader view of what is required to qualify for a real professional journalist. Oftentimes, journalism lecturers in Nigeria pretend to share what we do not have. Some of them are not well grounded with practical skills and expertise to teach their students, especially with the availability of modern and sophisticated equipment to be used in the studios and printing technologies (Pate & Ibrahim, 2020).

Resolution/Way forward

The ideal journalism situation is realisable as the practice grows into the future. However, beyond mere whimsical desire and rhetorics, responsible journalism can only be realisedif practitioners strictly conform to ethical professionalism. The desired professionalism can only be attained when both journalists in the fields and those in university and college classrooms were given 'responsible' media education and training in their formative stage either as journalism or mass communication students before they are offered internships in the media industry and or, employment. Therefore, quality training and retraining are the basic ingredients of the practice of responsible journalism in the country (Pate, 2008). It will help our understanding of this discourse to ask what then constitutes 'responsible media education' in this context. According to the advanced learners' dictionary, 'education is a process of teaching, training and learning especially in school or colleges, to improve knowledge and develop skill'. Thus, one can safely describe 'media education' as that conscious and deliberate effort of imparting media knowledge with the sole aim of training future and practising media practitioners with the right tools, technology and resources to make them suitable for the industry. The training can be before one gets into the industry and on the job.

Responsible media education is strategic for installing the right psyche among upcoming journalists to prepare them to create positive change in the lives of individuals, groups or society, in line with the new developments and innovations in the media industry.However, for the profession to maintain high standards of integrity and professionalism, educators must have field experience and knowledge of the social, political, economic and even religious roles of mass media in the Northeast. This further translates the fact that a veteran journalist and a teacher can combine his practical experience and knowledge (theories) in the

class and develop the mental and intellectual capacity of his students (Ghandi in Kamath, 2008).

Truly, without proper regulation, the media can be biased and unethical in its reportage and the north-east now requires an unbiased media practice that can contribute to the reconstruction of the region. Mu'azu (2012) observes that bias, partisanship and lack of objectivity characterise press reporting conflict in Northeastern Nigeria. Press reporting appears to be episodic, the subject of citizen rights is downplayed and instead, there is some interest that the press wants to protect or promote.

Therefore, this ugly trend links to the level and type of media education that students of journalism and mass communication receive in school. This development seriously denies the public the right to true and accurate information from journalists in our region, thus constituting a stumbling block in safeguarding citizens' 'right to know' through the media as guaranteed in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

In the Nigerian context in general and the Northeast in particular, only a few media educators today are computer literate, thus they hardly prioritise computer skills training for students in schools. Therefore, how can a student comfortably learn and understand how to operate a computer editing machine, for example? In this scenario, it is very difficult for aspiring journalists to get employment in this highly competitive and digitalisedlabour market, (Pate, 2022). However, it has become imperative to equip all upcoming journalists adequately for the contemporary challenges in the profession to become relevant locally and globally by preparing students to engage in practical projects from an early stage to increase their employability (Chibita, 2010).

The professional norms that qualify one to be a good and responsible journalist, among others, include truthfulness, objectivity, neutrality and detachment (Kempf, 2007). Journalism is a profession of gathering, processing, evaluating and disseminating information, ideas or opinion based on facts on current issues, and requires an extensive and responsible education or specialized training by a professional.

Media instructors in the Northeast need to be dramatically converted into responsible professionals to acquire public trust and confidence and this may be

done by sticking to the ethical ideals of the profession and making students more engaged in the classroom and practical in the studio Similarly, media instructors must be socially accountable by teaching pupils the moral, cultural and social images of the society. As mass communicators, we are taught in our public relations class that a socially responsible corporation is that organization which is perceived to be doing what it proclaims. By implication, a hospital must be viewed to be delivering economical and excellent medical care to the community in which it is located. Similarly, a police force is founded to provide protection to the property and lives of the people and it must be shown to be doing exactly that. On the other hand, journalism which is also part of society is also a profession which performs services of educating enlightening and entertaining society and it must be perceived to be doing exactly that.

Many media companies may regard the cost of responsible practice to be on the high side, however, the cost is not exorbitant since the following outcomes are anticipated by all those in the profession for the benefit of the profession and the society that the media serve:

i. Flushes out quacks: When ethical journalism is supported by all stakeholders — newspaper publishers, editors, journalists and all the regulatory bodies – quacks inevitably find their way out of the industry. Where they don't, they reform and practice properly.
ii. Professionalize journalism and improves standards of practice: It also encourages professionalization since everyone enters into the profession via the same door and that enhances the level of the profession.
iii. Improve adherence to code of ethics: Since media owners and student journalists pay heavily in the evolution and promotion of responsible media education in order to have responsible media practice, adherence to the code of ethics also becomes strict because payment of staff salaries and allowances obviously improves.
iv. Serves society better: When the aforementioned are followed, naturally the finest minds will be drawn to the profession and eventually society will be served better because the best are in the profession everything it takes to make them excellent servants of the people have been put in place. Serving society better means publishing tales that will encourage peaceful coexistence amongst varied groups, stimulates economic growth, generates employment opportunities and promote justice and good governance.

Professional sanity is the ultimate purpose of fostering responsible media education and disregarding responsible media creates precisely the scenario we

have in Nigeria. Everybody may be a journalist and many newspapers and radio stations don't pay employees' salary as and when due.

The following are the primary costs that society pays for disregarding proper media education: Poor 'irresponsible' performance of journalists, or more correctly those who profess to be journalists. Society is not well served if its journalists do not know or have the ability to deliver the best. Good journalists are renowned to put their lives on the line in order to serve their society. Anyone who is willing to put his life on the line in service of society should the equipped with everything that he needs to serve. Where those basic components are absent service becomes difficult since one cannot offer what he doesn't have.

The lure of quacks into and bastardization of the profession as an all-comers profession. With the required training, abilities, equipment and items needed to work missing the greatest minds inevitably drain away, leaving those without something decent to do. Exactly that is the dilemma with journalism in Nigeria as most, if not all practitioners are only in the profession for lack of anything to do. Doors of journalism have been left wide, because those who chose to stay are typically impotent.

Under-performance in serving society because vital things that will bring about progress and prosperity are disregarded while trifling matters are given importance. Nigerian media practitioners are some of the best in the world, but the lack of responsible media education has resulted in the media focusing more attention on trivial issues that may not add any value to society while neglecting fundamental ones that are needed in nation-building and bringing development.

Encouraging unethical behaviors and sometimes fostering crises and dissension within the society being serviced. Lack of proper media education also encourages unethical activities among journalists. The more journalists are inadequately taught, compensated and motivated the more opportunity for unethical behaviors are allowed to grow, and ultimately the more media practitioners encourage division across varied groups in the nation. Partly, this is the situation with the Nigerian media. These immoral activities frequently end in adversely serving society.

Conclusion

Professionalism and responsible journalism cannot be realized where there is no responsible media education which, in itself, must be coloured with lecturers who are also foot soldiers and not armchair 'professionals' whose contributions can hardly be taken out of their immediate classrooms or those who do not appreciate the rigours of being a journalist on the field. Conversely, rebuilding any society destroyed by a crisis like insurgency requires everybody's contribution including that of the mass media. The media is seen as the most important because of the apparent power it possesses in mobilizing the general public. It is now evident that socioeconomic activities in the northeast which was destroyed as a result of the insurgency can only be restored when the media deploys its power to project that region's positive sides and the negative sides are deemphasized.

It is also important to state that, it is only when journalism educators receive practical training and are encouraged to take up part-time jobs in various media organizations that the profession can well be respected and appreciated in the society. Similarly, the skills of journalism should form a prominent content of the pre-qualification and on-the-job training for journalists in Nigeria. In other words, efforts should be intensified towards training and retraining media professionals on the coverage of vital contemporary issues such as conflict, politics and climate change; such training should cover skills and ethics of professional and responsible journalism. Agba (2003) notes that "environmental and investigative reporting has not been given its due place in the course content of students training to become journalists in Nigeria." This trend ought to be reversed if the country is going to make any headway in its effort to maximize responsible journalism towards achieving the goal of a safe and informed society.

Again, this skill acquisition should aim at making the journalists more capable of reporting professionally, especially when covering the crisis, politics investigative and interpretative stories. This is against the deadpan reporting approach. Importantly, such training on skill acquisition should integrate the ethics of fair, independent, balance and objective journalism. This way, issues of sensationalism and distortion common with professionalism and responsible journalism could be proactively dealt with.

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