

Scarcity of Watchdog Journalism in Nigeria Broadcast Media: The Way Forward

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Abstract: *As one of the major roles of the media in a democracy, the watchdog function of the media continues to be relevant by the decades. As important as this role is, the media continues to come under scrutiny as to how effective their performance of the role has been and continues to be. The Nigerian media in general and broadcast media in particular have been found to be lagging in performing as watchdog of the society. Many reasons, ranging from, political, economic, cultural and social have been found to greatly affect the watchdog function. This study therefore, using the qualitative case study approach, explored the way forward on how to improve the performance of the role from the perspective of broadcast media practitioners. The findings of the study were arrived by coding and analysed thematically. The findings show that media regulations need to be improved upon, self-regulatory practices will also boost performance as well as improved professionalism on the part of practitioners.*

Keywords: *broadcasting, media, regulation, watchdog*

1. Introduction

The society has always relied on the media for information to help them understand democratic processes and to make informed decisions about societal issues. The reason seems to be the fact that providing informational compass for society is a traditionally ascribed and sacred duty assumed by the media. Hence, the media holds a sacred position in the society, they assume the role of managing and distributing information which is consistent with their call to stand in place of the people as a voice just like the social watchdogs (Yusha’u, 2009).

As part of the roles and functions of media in the society, serving as watchdog over government and any other public institution, is regarded by the public and the media itself as one of the most important duties it ought to perform for the public. This is because it is believed that, those in authority who wield power need to be checkmated against abusing public trust. This believe may have perhaps, contributed to the nick naming of media as the fourth estate of the realm centuries ago by Edmund Burke to be the watchful eyes and ears of the public by serving as a watchdog over government and public officials.

Increasingly, Nigerian society on its own, continues to clamour to see effective watchdog activities in the media, they want to see media organizations that will monitor authorities for transparency, accountability and responsible service delivery. As such, they have willed the right and power of attorney of their conscience to the media to exercise that on their behalf and

demand that authorities live up to their expectation. For instance, in Nigeria, the Freedom of Information Act of 2011 has given every citizen the right to exclusive disclosure of information in government custody, however, most citizens rather trust the media to investigate and disclose whatever information to them. Thus, the media are expected to keep surveillance by setting agenda, pursuing agenda and provide the public with the structures for understanding issues in the various forms of news coverage (Oso, 2013). The expectation of the public is to see a responsible media judged by how they propagate, support and promote the views and opinions of individuals in respect of governance, leadership and stewardship of leaders in public governance.

Consequently, it is in acknowledgement of the importance of the media as watchdog of the society, that the Nigerian constitution of 1999 expressly articulated the constitutional role of the media. Chapter 2, Sub-section 22 of the constitution (as amended) states in part that, “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people”. As reiterated by Agbo and Chukwuma (2016) this constitutional provision further affirms the importance of the watchdog role and therefore, empowers the media to monitor, investigate, inform and alert the public of wrongdoings of government and its agencies. However, it is one thing to assume the traditional function and quite another to press authorities to carry out their directive duties spelt out by a nation’s constitution. That concern may have led scholars like Nwosu (1993) to question the genuineness of watchdogging in the Nigerian media.

Specifically, broadcast media is known for its virility and ability to simultaneously reach a wider or larger audience especially in a developing country like Nigeria where radio is widely listened to by both rural and urban citizens. Arguably, this advantage should propel it to do more in holding the government accountable. However, most of those struggles and activism which coronate democracy in Nigeria are often identified with the press (print media), perhaps for obvious and apparent reasons such as they being the pioneer media before broadcasting. Apart from that, it is the press (print media) that continues to make demands on government with the broadcast media criticized for failing in this regard (Ojomo, 2009). Besides, up until 1992, broadcast media in Nigeria was completely a monopoly of government. But, in 1992, it was deregulated to include private ownership and since then, there has been proliferation and plurality.

The main issue of concern here is that the watchdog role function of the media is not limited to the print media alone, infact, if anything, as earlier stated, the Nigerian constitution specifically mentioned “radio and television” alongside print media to hold public authorities accountable to the people. In addition, in spite of this plurality, and also the constitutional provision and other laws enabling broadcast media to carry out their professional duty as watchdog, print media seems to lead the vanguard in doing so, broadcast media performance of the role continue to come under question (Ojomo, 2009, p.11). They are seen not to live up to that, instead they act as lapdogs, promoting government agenda and failing to provide well-investigated and

needed information for the public (Ojomo, 2009, Amodu, Usaini, & Ige, 2014; Ngwu, 2015). In that regard, many questions are still being asked regarding what broadcast media activity constitutes watchdog function. Hence, the question begs, why broadcast media seems to be lagging in the performance of its role as watchdog compared with their print media counterpart.

The need to see more watchdog reporting in Nigeria broadcast media seems bleak. Many reasons such as ownership interference, news commercialization, press freedom in Nigeria, corruption in the media and poor remuneration for journalists have been found and assumed as to why broadcast media in Nigeria rarely attempt watchdog feat, (Akinwale, 2010; Ali, 2015; Apuke, 2016 and Gainaka, Alsagoff, & Ghazali, 2020).

While many studies have found out why there is a lack of watchdog reporting in Nigeria broadcast media, there is a need to proffer solutions to the lingering issues. Thus, this study, using the qualitative case study method sought to discover the way forward in bringing about improvement in the watchdog role of broadcast media in Nigeria from the perspective of broadcast media practitioners.

2. Overview of Nigeria broadcast media

In Nigeria as in many other African countries, print media preceded broadcast media. Even when radio and television broadcasting was introduced, it was initially an exclusive preserve of government and it remained so for many years (Jibo & OkoosiSimbine, 2003). However, in almost fifty years on the continent of Africa and in spite of a number of efforts to subdue its independence, Nigeria has one of the most bouncing and yet still blooming broadcast media. The country has many Television and Radio Stations most of which are owned by Private Companies and Individuals.

In 1990, the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida adopted a communication policy known as the National Communication Policy. This policy further encouraged and strengthened monopoly of broadcast media by the government for the purpose of maintaining national interest of unity and development. However, the proliferation of Broadcast Media outfits was made possible in 1992 when the government receded its communication policy by promulgating the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). The NBC was established by an act, Decree No. 38 of 1992. By virtue of this decree, the exclusive ownership of broadcast media by government became repealed thereby ushering in an era of private broadcasting in Nigeria after many years of government monopoly. In 1999, the decree was amended to the National Broadcasting Commission Decree No. 5 of 1999 (Aginam, 2010) and saddled with the responsibility of regulating all aspects of broadcasting in Nigeria.

While deregulation of broadcast media took place in 1992, it was until in 1994 that private broadcasting took effect. With deregulation and the powers of regulation given to NBC, it was expected that, the environment for broadcasting and broadcasters would be free or at least, to a large extent. However, that was not the case, as government is still in control of the commission.

It is not as independent as it should, considering that till present, only the president has the power to issue licences on the recommendation of the commission (Aginam, 2010; Chukwu, 2015).

Aginam (2010) reported that, deregulation was not done out of the goodwill of military government. He argued that, having control over broadcast media was key to consolidation of power for them even though their reasons for monopoly were dubiously laced in their interpretation of the media as partners for development whose duty is to partner with government to achieve developmental goals. But, economic, technological, and political factors many of which were difficult for government to control forced them to deregulate. Some of these factors like economic also led to the commercialization of the government owned radio and television because funding was grossly inadequate. The present state of broadcasting vis a vis the functions of the NBC has evolved over the years, however, the NBC is still criticized for its lack of independence.

In its bid to carryout its duties, the broadcasting code referred to as The Code, was enacted by the NBC to serve as a guide for broadcasting. Broadcast media stations in Nigeria work by the regulations in the broadcasting code in order to achieve the objectives of broadcasting. In many ways, broadcast stations continue to complain about some of the functions of the agency especially as it regards licencing. Arguments have been put forward regarding the level of independence of the agency which, is seen as a tool used to witch hunt stations who do not agree with government especially private stations.

3. Media and the watchdog role

The media as watchdog connotes an entity saddled with the duty of performing surveillance over government, institutions and authorities in the society. This function also equips the media to monitor, guard and expose abuse of power by government and other wrong doings in the interest of the society. The media as watchdog has its historical root in the eighteenth century. This is attributed to Edmond Burke who referred to the press sitting at the gallery as the fourth estate of the then British realm, whom he saw as having enormous political power. The media has since then been regarded as a powerful institution with certain roles to perform in the society. Of the many roles of the media in the society, the watchdog role is regarded as the most important (Graber, 2009). The media as watchdog employ diverse ways to perform the watchdog role.

According to Onyemaobi (2018), they perform the role through informing and educating the public about the social, political and economic decisions of government, setting agenda and moulding opinions on issues of public importance, educating the public to make informed decisions regarding politics and elections and exposing corruption and abuse of public trust. This shows that the media as watchdog does an all-round monitorial as well as guardian role in the public interest. The media as watchdog, performing all these roles makes them an indispensable part of democracy. However, as watchdog, it connotes a free and responsible entity. The media can only thrive in a free atmosphere, free of all kinds of unnecessary influence

and control, having a climate where it will not be muzzled by all kinds of interferences so that it can serve its purpose of being the eyes and ears of the public in checkmating authorities (Whitten-Woodring & James, 2012).

Oso (2012) the media as fourth estate (watchdog) is underscored by certain basic concepts through which media freedom is assessed. He noted that the key ideas include pluralism and diversity in ownership, access to media and professionalism and ethics. These basic concepts are also in line with the social responsibility theory of the media (McQuail, 2010). By access, diversity and pluralism it connotes that the media as watchdog should provide a forum for all constituent groups in the society and should reflect the diversity of various points of view in the society. In the area of professionalism, it connotes that media as watchdog need to observe the highest form of professionalism by maintaining truth and objectivity in discharging its duty (Oso, 2012).

Gleason as cited in Becker, English, Vlad & Han (2013) noted that the media as watchdog is a feature of a free press. He argued that media campaigners have used the watchdog role to push for statutory safety for the media. Hence, his argument views media as watchdog more in opposition to government and authorities in favour of the public. He pointed that the media serves as agents of the people by keeping a monitorial eye on government and barking when they fail. Similarly, Oso (2013) reasoned that the mass media takes a position of an institution concerned with public interest. They do this by serving as watchdog, information providers and enablers of the public sphere. Noting that the watchdog role is seen as the most critical especially in a democracy like Nigeria, he asserted that by the reason of government being in position of authority and power, a close check and scrutiny of their activities is apparent in order to shine light on any attempt at abuse of public trust. For this reason, Oso related thus:

The press thus becomes an instrument working on behalf of the people to bring their governors to account for their action or inaction. It is for the press to be able to do this effectively that the liberal tradition put a lot of emphasis on press autonomy and independence. (Oso, 2013, p.15).

However, as watchdogs, the media is cautioned not to take their role over-board by degenerating to attack dogs who are constantly against government by always portraying and presenting them in negative light and engaging in excessive criticism. This, as Spiess (2011) and Isike & Omotosho (2017) observed births intolerance towards government which, is detrimental to baby democracies and render media unprofessional.

In performing its duty as watchdog, investigative reporting or journalism serves as one of the major ways the media perform its watchdog role. Infact, investigative journalism has often times been seen as what watchdog journalism is about. More so, scholars have often used both terms interchangeably to often mean the same thing (Coronel, 2010). In this study also, it has been used interchangeably. However, Waisbord (2015) has tried to give a distinction between

watchdog journalism and investigative reporting as earlier discussed in this chapter. And scholars have argued that while, they may represent one and the same thing, investigative journalism is a type of watchdog journalism (Spiess, 2011; Coronel, 2010; Waisbord, 2015). That notwithstanding, the performance of media as watchdog, is ultimately judged by its investigative actions (Gainaka, Alsagoff, Ghazali, 2020).

According to the watchdog ideal, the media should trail, scrutinize, and assess government and other institutions so as to monitor corruption and tendencies of power abuse. As Tettey (2006) asserts, the concept of the media as watchdog is essentially based on the idea that the public needs to be protected against abuse of power by those who wield power in the society. Thus, a free media is required to the responsibility and accountability of government to the people.

4. Methodology

The study was carried-out using the qualitative case study method. This method was chosen for a few compelling reasons. First, according to Merriam (2009, p.5), qualitative researchers are generally interested in the meaning and interpretation that people give to their experiences as well as how they create their worlds. For this study, the researcher sought to explore and discover how the watchdog function of broadcast media can be improved upon from an internal perspective of broadcast media practitioners.

To achieve this, two (2) broadcast media organizations were selected. The selection was based on their ownership types, national reach as well as how long they have been in existence. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and Africa Independent Television (AIT) both met the criteria for selection.

Based on the premise that qualitative research is not aimed at generalizing findings (Merriam, 2009), the informants for the study were purposively selected. In order to achieve the aim of the study, ten (10) broadcasters were purposively selected from both organizations. The informants comprised of six (6) senior editors and four (4) field reporters. The selection of this group of informants was informed based on the variation that while reporters work on the field, senior editors are decision makers and so they represent two levels of participants. Another rationale is for the researcher to be able to elicit possibly, varying data from different sources.

The researcher collected data using semi-structured, face to face interview with each informant (Creswell, 2012). This interview format was chosen because it guides research by ensuring focus while still providing room for probing of informants. It also, gives room for flexibility in asking questions.

The data collected was analysed using the thematic analysis format (Yin, 2018).

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Improving broadcast media watchdog role in Nigeria

The objective of the study sought to identify or determine how broadcast media can improve on their watchdog role. This became necessary on the premise that the challenges and difficulties experienced by broadcast media in Nigeria in performing its watchdog function need to be

addressed in order to have an effective broadcast media that can be able to discharge its watchdog role more efficiently and elicit development for the society. Hence, the findings here show from practitioners themselves practical ways on how broadcast media watchdog role can improve. The analysis of data from informants' showed the following:

5.2 Improved broadcast media regulations and self-regulatory practices

Media regulations are in place in order to check the activities of media and to ensure professionalism. While expressing support for regulation of the broadcast media in Nigeria, Informants expressed that for their watchdog role performance to improve, some regulations need to be improved upon to especially check and tackle how much influence or interference media owners (government or private) have on the content. An informant from AIT explained, *"I believe that the codes of practice given to us by the NBC are there to ensure professionalism in our practice, but a review of those codes to mention specifically what owners of media including government can do and cannot do will go a long way in crippling their want to always be portrayed in positive light by us"*. Two other informants from FRCN also agree that the level of influence owners have on the medium and its content should be regulated so that they can gain the full confidence of their audience. One of them explained thus, *"the perception among many people out there is that nothing trust worthy comes out of all government media, the public believes that we are just the mouth piece of government, and that is not far from the truth. But the truth is that broadcast media is in a competition, now even from the social media. what this means is that we cannot sit and continue in the status quo, we must find ways to stand out to win back the confidence of the people. The interference of ownership must be reduced to its barest minimum, because the people know the difference"*. The other one corroborated thus: *"one of the ways we can improve on our performance of this role and other roles is to ensure that just like in countries like the UK where the BBC is funded by government or public funds, but the government has no influence at all, the most they (government) can do is to go to court if the BBC does anything they are not supposed to do, the roles of broadcast media owners should be defined by the laws that set them up, Let the extent to which they can influence media content be clearly defined"*. Over all, the informants explained that while the regulation of broadcast media is necessary to ensure a socially responsible media, such regulations need to be improved upon to also specifically provide mechanisms for the regulation of how much influence owners have on content. Informants in FRCN mostly believe that they have a duty to unite the nation in every aspect of their broadcast, however, they also believe that the first obligation of journalism is to the truth and not a mouth piece for those in power, as such the best way to curb the excesses of special interest is through regulation. Those in AIT also share in the belief that more regulation on owners is needed for them to truly represent the interest of the public. According to the informants, the codes of practice and ethics given by the NBC has stated that broadcast media will be protected against any interference whether political or economic, however, it has not ensured that that is achieved.

Therefore, this means that regulations on broadcast media ownership and how much influence owners have on media content need to be improved upon to enable a freer environment for broadcast media to be more active and effective in the performance of their watchdog role.

Moreover, it is in tandem with Shardow (2015) who concluded that for the media to be effective watchdogs in Ghana, its regulatory agency, the Ghanaian National Media Commission (NMC) must ensure media freedom by rising against government influence in media activities through exercising its duty as a regulator. Also, Endong (2017) compared the Nigerian and Cameroonian government owned media as watchdog or adversarial media. Endong found that these state owned media are mostly adversarial which has affected their ability to be effective watchdogs, as such more succinct laws or regulations should be set up to completely stop government control of the media. Also, the call for more improved regulations supports the social responsibility theory (Mcquail, 2010) which upholds and promotes that regulations should be made for the media in order to check and ensure that it is responsible in discharging its duties and functions to the public. Since owners of broadcast media in Nigeria influence their work, the National Broadcast Commission has upon itself a duty to improve upon regulations that would see to the reduction of the influence of owners.

Also, Informants advocated for what some of them referred to as total self-regulation by broadcast media as a means of improving performance. In what they describe as international best practices for the media, self-regulation entails guidelines and rules espoused by media practitioners free of intervention by external legislation or bodies (Alsagoff, 2016). Two informants in AIT expressed similar ideas as to why self regulation needs to be embedded in broadcast media thus: “ *self regulation is necessary for the upholding of this profession, because, there is no way, the regulators who comprise of mostly non professionals will ensure a clean work. Believe me, if it was made up of professionals, some of the issues especially how media houses are regulated would not arise*”. Similarly another informant expressed “*if we are self regulated, I know that some of the control of ownership will greatly reduce and we will have more freedom to discharge our duties professionally*”. This shows that self-regulation, as practiced in other climes, is a viable means of achieving independence for the media which would go a long way in addressing some of the challenges hindering effective watchdog performance of broadcast media, this would in turn improve professionalism and even respect for media practitioners.

5.3 Improved professionalism

Findings also revealed that the standard of professionalism in broadcast media needs to be improved upon. Professionalism entails that certain skills, competence, quality and conduct are expected of a profession. Informants explained that many factors can improve professionalism in broadcast media practice. This implies that when professionalism is upheld, broadcast media can perform its obligation of being the watchdog of the society more effectively. Informants revealed that for the watchdog role performance of broadcast media to improve, organizations must invest in training and re-training of broadcast journalists. They believe this will build and raise professional standards. One informant in AIT explained in his words; “*Because of lack of funds, training of journalists in our organizations is not as frequent as it should be. But, I would say that one of the ways to improve on our performance will be to invest in teaching and training of journalists so that we can be upto date with journalistic best practices, such trainings will also re-enforce the need for ethical practice which will definitely improve professionalism.*”

Without periodic and constant training of journalists, they will not be upto date with global best practices, and seeing that there are many in broadcast media practice who are not well trained, such training will equip journalists with more skills and improve ethical and professional standards. Another informant agreed thus, “It is when you know something that you can do it or prevent it. Training and re-training is needed by maybe some foreign experts like the BBC or some people that have been in the practice for a longer period, so that some of us will be updated with how to go about performing our functions and get over self-censorship”. In addition to routine training for journalists, informants also believe that there should be a re-education of broadcast media journalist to reiterate to them how important and affective their function is to the society.

Responses from informants essentially shows that broadcast media watchdog role performance will improve when there is an improvement in the standard and adherence to professionalism. This professionalism involves increased ownership by media professionals as opposed to politicians, ensuring that balance and objectivity as well as constant training and re-training of staff to equip them with the necessary skills and keep them reminded of the need to ensure adherence to ethics of the profession Coronel (2010). According to Ngwu (2015), Yeoh (2011) and Spiess (2011) the media must ensure professionalism in all its dealings because it will make them more effective watchdogs. They argued that adherence to ethics and professional standards will not only improve media performance, but it will gain them the confidence and trust of audience as well as take away undue attention from regulators. Hence, this finding corroborates Coronel (2010) and Woldeamanuel (2012) who stressed that, training and re-training of journalists in investigative journalism skills and methods and ensuring that journalists discharge their duties responsibly is key to improving the capacity of media to be effective in carrying out investigative journalism.

6. Conclusion

The watchdog role is an obligation on the media to monitor, guard and protect the interest of the public. As an obligation, the media must rise above all limitations imposed on them whether by stifling laws, self-censorship and other innocuous yet, impeding ways. The codes of the national broadcasting commission (NBC) which guides broadcasting needs to be reviewed and updated to improve practice, self-regulation has proven to be effective in climes like the United Kingdom, this should be considered to further improve professionalism.

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