



Insecurity: A Conundrum of National Interest and The Right to Know

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Abstract

The rise of terrorism all over the world and especially in Nigeria has led to calls for the media to join the fight against this rising negative trend. Arguments exist in different quarters on the exact role the media have to play in stemming this tide. Using the libertarian and also, the social responsibility theory, this paper attempts an exploratory study on the right of the citizens to know within the two press systems theorized. It also discusses the available framework for the press and citizens in Nigeria such as the Freedom of Information Act, the NBC code and the definitions and entitlements of public interest. The paper examines the Nigerian government's directive to the press to reduce reportage of terror-related news and concludes by reiterating the right of the citizenry to know, the role of the press in upholding this right and the duty of citizens to hold the press responsible as information sources.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Social Responsibility, Freedom of Information, Media*

Introduction

Globally, there has been a rise in acts of terrorism within and across borders of nations of the world. From the United Kingdom to New Zealand and even to Africa, there has been a constant rise in acts of terror (Mekaj, 2020). Nigeria is not left out as terrorism has also risen in the largest black country, just as globalization has increased in the West African nation.

Even with the global and local rise in acts of terrorism and insecurity, there is an observed reduction in the coverage of insecurity by local media whereas, international media cover these things more. Arguments exist regarding this. While one may argue that insecurity itself makes it

harder for local media to cover such news, it can also be argued that due to insecurity, it is becomingly increasingly difficult to verify such news when it comes hence media may shy away from reporting what they are unable to verify. Another case in point may also be that foreign media gives full coverage to Nigerian national insecurity issues like terrorism, banditry and the likes while they don't give due coverage to issues of national development.

Regardless of which argument prevails, there is little empirical work available to exactly explain the true state of things and the observed low coverage of issues bordering on insecurity and terrorism in Nigeria.

However, there is a need to engage in intellectual and social discourse especially as it concerns the role of the press in society and also the theoretical and legal frameworks within which the press can carry out its responsibilities to its citizenry.

Terrorism

This refers to the use of force unlawfully or violently against any group of persons or their properties to force or intimidate them or their government to achieve certain social or political goals or objectives.

Insecurity

Insecurity is the state of being at the risk of danger or attack. It is also a state of being vulnerable (Udoh, 2015).

According to Adegbami (2013), the right to security is one of the fundamental human rights of a people in any given nation. It is so important that it is usually provided for or contained in the constitution of most sovereign states. Nigeria is not an exception to this as found in Section 14 (2) (b) of the Nigerian 1999 constitution where it is stated that the primary purpose of the government is the security and welfare of the people.

Theoretical Backings

Theoretically, this paper is domiciled under the Free Press Theory or Libertarian theory by McQuail (1987) and the Social Responsibility Theory propounded by Hutchins Commission (1947). These two theories are applicable because they address the two concerns regarding the role of the press in freely carrying out its responsibility of maintaining the right to know of the citizenry without jeopardizing public interest or national security.

The Free Press Theory believes in the rationality of people and their capacity for independent thought. It is concerned with the freedom of expression and access to different ideas and

information that people can choose from Ifeanyi (1999) in Omu & Oboh (2008). Based on this, the media in this system are free to perform their duties of being a watchdog and can report on government activities or issues of public or national interest without any disturbance. However, the downside to this is that the media then have so much freedom, being over-pampered and irresponsible in the discharge of its duties (Omu & Oboh, 2008) and (Anaeto et. al 2008).

This downside is then addressed by the Social Responsibility theory which advocates the obligation of responsibility associated with freedom of the press. According to Baran & Davis (2015), this theory puts a burden on media professionals to scrutinize other social institutions while providing objective, accurate news reports. They further opined that under the theory, the media is expected to accept and fulfil certain obligations to society and must be self-regulating.

The Right to Know

The right to know as enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides that every citizen shall be entitled to express themselves freely, they shall hold opinions, receive and impart ideas and information freely without interference. Freedom is given in this constitution, to anyone to own, set up and operate any medium for the purpose of disseminating ideas, opinions and information.

According to Omu & Oboh (2008), there are international principles of journalism and the media which are binding or deemed so, by every media professional or journalist. These ethical standards were established by international and regional professional journalists at their fourth consultative meeting which was held in Paris and Prague in 1983. Top of these standards includes the right of the people or public to true information. In other words, the journalists also have an obligation to provide the right information to the people just as the government also has an obligation to allow for freedom in the practice of journalism as any hindrance to this, will infringe the rights of the citizenry to receive information.

The press which is often described as the fourth estate of the realm is an organ of the people which serves their right to know and also, holds the government accountable to the people. This right to know, to inform and be informed as Onabajo (2002) puts it, is a fundamental human right and must not be subject to qualification or restrictions by the government or any international bodies. This thought is advanced by Omu & Oboh (2008) who opine that when government tamper with press freedom, then it is an interference with the right of the citizens to know as enshrined in the constitution.

The question then may be, has the government in any way, hindered or restricted the free dissemination of information on matters of insecurity or terrorism in Nigeria? The duties of the press which include but are not limited to informing the society appear simple but when viewed from the context of media influence and shaping public opinion and also affecting social change, then the powers of the press when free are made evident and it is in the realization of this that many governments with that of Nigeria not exempted, taking steps to curtail these functions (Omu & Oboh 2008).

The implications of constant reportage of insecurity in a nation can be far-reaching. For instance, this can affect foreign direct investment, bi-lateral relations between countries can also be strained or strengthened, the citizens may see the government as incapable and lose faith in the government in the day thereby leading to an uprising, rioting etc. This suggests why perhaps, any government may be careful about the unfettered coverage of insecurity within its borders however, this is an infringement of the right of the citizens to know.

Freedom of Information Act, NBC Code and Public Interest

The Nigerian Freedom of Information Act 2011 gives any person the right to request any record, data or information from any public institution or establishment. According to Duru & Ezeh (2018), this act is designed to embed transparency and accountability in all public institutions. This also means that based on this, media practitioners and or the public can readily request information regarding insecurity and terrorism. However, it should be noted based on this act that all information can be requested except the one that is stated in the law (Ojo, 2015) in (Duru & Ezeh, 2018). For a matter that concerns everyone such as insecurity or terrorism, such should not be put in such law and where they are, advocacy groups need to ensure its removal by the government.

According to Onabajo (2002), one of the main functions of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) is to decide and also give sanctions to media outlets that do not operate by the broadcast code and or in the public interest. The argument then subsists, what exactly is the public interest?

Part of the ethical obligations of the journalist or media practitioner is respect for the national interest as established by Omu & Oboh (2008). They opine that the media has an obligation to respect national interest, national values, institutions and public morals.

Government after government has seen this provision as an opportunity to reduce the level of reportage of insecurity by the Nigerian media. The observed reduction in how insecurity is reported in the Nigerian media does not tally with the ranking of Nigeria as the country with the third-highest cases of insecurity and terrorism in the world, only after Afghanistan and Iran (Global Terrorism Index, 2019). In other words, the media do not report a lot of cases of insecurity or terrorism, which does not mean they do not happen or exist daily.

The NBC in a letter dated 7th July 2021 and titled ‘Newspaper Reviews and Current Affairs Programmes: A Need for Caution’, warned broadcast media houses who do newspaper reviews to refrain from giving details of insecurity and terrorist attacks as well as naming the victims. The NBC in the letter further informed broadcast stations to desist from providing details on the scale or magnitude of insecurity as such details may adversely affect national security. Part of the letter also reads that broadcast stations should advise analysts on their programmes not to be divisive in their comments but to maintain neutrality in line with the provisions of the NBC code which states that when reporting situations of conflict or insecurity, the broadcaster is expected to perform the role of a peace agent through adherence to the principles of responsibility, accuracy, and neutrality.

The argument of NBC in this regard to the provisions of its act, does not hold water as there is an insufficient argument or evidence to suggest that the broadcast stations have behaved irresponsibly, inaccurately or in a biased manner. This paper strongly believes that if any station is found guilty of violating any of the above-mentioned parameters, then they should face the consequences of their actions. However, what will be inaccurate is when the media fail to report or mention the casualty figures or location of these attacks. What will be irresponsible is when the media do not give due coverage to these acts of insecurity or terrorism, thereby making the public have a false sense of happenings and consequently, a false sense of security. What will not be neutral is when the media don't report these instances of terrorism and as expected, report only or more of the activities of state actors in the conflict thereby making it look as if these acts of insecurity do not exist.

From the above argument, it is evident that NBC through this directive is instructing the media to operate contrary to the provisions of the NBC act itself, referenced in the letter as well as contrary to the right to impart and receive ideas and information as provided in the Nigerian constitution of 1999. The same act referenced states that in reporting conflict, the

media should adhere to responsibility, accuracy and neutrality. To follow this directive is to go contrary to these provisions.

According to Oyero (2021), leaders in the media sector in Nigeria have strongly condemned and kicked against this directive as they say that the media only reports activities and events but does not create them.

This directive by the Nigerian government negates the right of the citizen to know. It also negates the right of the citizen to impart ideas freely as well as the right of the citizenry to know.

Conclusion

The media in Nigeria have a choice to make. A choice to fulfil their obligations to the public by providing accurate and correct information on happenings in the country including happenings on insecurity no matter the side on who the tide is. The public also has a responsibility to ensure that their right to know is not withheld or withdrawn in any manner or form, no matter how veiled it may be.

The public must ensure that they hold the press responsible for their fundamental assignment and commitment to reporting events as they occur, without prejudice or bias.

It is therefore recommended that the public be enlightened on the right that they have to know what is happening around them. Also, the government needs to understand that such directives have no place in a nation wherein the right to receive and impart ideas is constitutionally backed. It should be further noted wherein “public interest” is cited as the reason for such directives as to the one by NBC, there must be proof beyond measure that indeed such reports are against public interest and national security.

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