

The Challenge of Religious Consideration in News Reportage by Nigerian Media in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Journalism entails a high degree of public trust and to earn and maintain this trust, it becomes morally imperative for news media to observe the best professional and ethical practices such as accuracy and fairness, objectivity etc., and above all, have high regard for the public interest. However, it is commonly observed that adherence to these rules has become an uphill task for many journalists due to ownership, house style, editorial policy and primordial considerations. Hence, they blatantly disregard these ethics by injecting sentiment in their news reportage. This is why this paper examines religious consideration in news reporting by the media in a multiethnic and multi religious society like Nigeria with a touch of historical excursion. The study is guided by the agenda setting and social responsibility theories, and adopts qualitative research method, basically historical excursion and comparative exposition. The study argues that journalists are sometimes forced by religious leaning, sales and ownership factors to colour their news reportage. In view of this, the study recommends amongst other things, that personal and parochial interests must pave way for objectivity, fairness, balance, truth, and accuracy in the reporting of religion in order for the media to foster unity, harmonious co-existence among the various religious groups and overall development of the country.

Key words: Challenges, Religious Consideration, News, Reportage, Religion, 21st Century

Introduction

Religious consideration in news coverage is as old as the Nigerian media, dating back to the pre-colonial period when the first newspaper and missionary mouth piece- *Iwe Irohin* debuted in 1859. An analysis of religious news reportage in pre-twenty-first century era to contemporary time shows that while the former report events with a soft religious undertone, the latter period saw an upsurge in biased reportage of religious issues from the perspective of religious affiliation of either the journalist or media owner. Ordinarily, religious chauvinism can be accepted and it should neither be privileged nor denied, that is, it is possible for an individual journalist or media owner to identify with his or her religion while remaining objective in his/her dealings with the followers of other religions but such ideal situation is yet to exist in Nigeria.

The media have, from time past, been likened to a double-edged sword in which case, you can use them to facilitate development and also use them to truncate development. Egbon (1996) agrees with this assertion, where he argues that:

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The media system can oil and ease the economic wheel of a country or bring them to a grinding halt. In the same vein, media can be used to maintain social equilibrium, facilitate change or seek radical alternatives. To this end, the Nigerian media should be development-driven in their news content, coverage and reporting (p.56).

However, the seeming ethical dilemma that the Nigerian media are confronted which cannot be divorced from the society where they operate, a society some scholars and critics of religion have referred to as “a God intoxicated society” It is so-called because proliferation of various religious sects cut across the two main religions in Nigeria: Islam and Christianity. The implication of this religious intoxication on the Nigerian society according to Makinde (1988) is that:

The entire country has become God intoxicated because of the bad political and economic situations of the country. Religion has become what psychologists call attention deployment. It has made many of us dreamers and fatalistic to the core. It has made all of us resign to our fate instead of intelligently reacting to abnormal situations whenever they stare us in the face (p.2).

Adherence to journalism ethics should be a core obligation especially in a multi-cultural environment like Nigeria but the reverse seems to be the case, hence the intermittent fanning of religious embers that continues to cause tension and crises thereby making peaceful co-existence among the divergent groups in Nigeria elusive. It is at the backdrop of this seeming dilemma of the Nigerian media in their treatment of religious news and reports that this paper examines the challenges of religious consideration in news reportage by the Nigerian media especially in the 21st century that demands cutting-edge skills and knowledge to solve varying problems thrown up by the digital technology.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is to appraise the challenges that come with religious consideration in news reportage by the Nigerian media.

Conceptual Operationalization

Challenges: in the context of this paper, challenges refer to something that needs a lot of skills, energy and determination to handle or achieve especially something or task that is daunting. In this wise, attempt is made to situate the skills and determination needed by the media in the reporting of religion in the new millennium. Journalists in reporting religious matters may be confronted by such challenges like being objective, avoiding criticisms from the public, reporting in such a manner as not to aggravate a bad situation among other challenges.

Religious Consideration: this concept in this study meant to examine religious issues thoroughly and carefully when making editorial decision in deference to the fairness doctrine. In other words, consideration is kindness and thoughtful regard for other religious beliefs other than your own as you would want them treat yours. This ground norm is otherwise known as *the golden rule*.

News: the definitions of news according to Lage (1979) are in general, countless, inconsistent among themselves and superficial, as he defines news as:

A report of a series of facts departing from the most important one, and then from the most important aspect. Thus, we reduce the field of discussion to what would be important, a word which summarizes abstract concepts such as truth or human interest. This allows us to regard the news as something which consists of two basic components: a relatively stable organization or the logical component, elements which are organized in the news, chosen according to essentially variable criteria-the ideological (, p.54).

Lage focuses, in a more consistent manner, on the generic elements of news (aspect of the organization and production processes), although it also lacks theoretical grounding.

Reporting: this represents the work of information gathering which serves as basis for several journalistic genres. Amaral (1982 p.133) states that reportage is the representation of a fact or event enriched by the author's intellectual capacity, careful observations, sentiments, creativity and fluent narrative. The work of a journalist can amount to nothing without reporting. When a journalist witnesses what has happened, he makes it known to members of the public by reporting it. The report comes in form of news, feature article, editorial, documentary, etc. When an event or issue is covered and reported in an unprofessional manner, it becomes unethical journalism as people are misinformed. News reporting is, therefore, key to journalism as a profession.

Religion: it is a reality that we belong to different religions. In Nigeria for instance, there are three dominant religions- traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. Religion deals with beliefs in the existence of a God and the worship of that God for the benefit of the believer or adherent. Durkheim (1915, p.112), in his seminal book, '*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*' defines religion as a 'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. By sacred things, Durkheim meant things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, and all those who adhere to them. Religion, therefore, is a set of beliefs and practices in relation to worshipping according to the beliefs of a particular group of people.

21st Century: this dispensation is referred to as the digital age whose defining feature is embroiled in technological innovations that have affected the orientation and practices of virtually all professions

and for the media industry in Nigeria, there is need to adopt the skills and practices that are embedded in the 21st century technology. Price (2017) notes that globalization means that the traditional method whereby a journalist gets a scoop for an individual newspaper is likely to be replaced by institutionalized collaboration between different news outfits with inputs from citizen journalists.

The term 21st century skills, according to Rich (2011) is generally used to refer to certain core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical-thinking, and problem-solving that advocates that schools need to teach and help students thrive in today's world. In a broader sense, however, the idea of what learning in the 21st century should look like is open to interpretation and controversy but all are in agreement that new skills and practices that are digitally -driven are required for every profession including journalism in order to deliver on efficient and acceptable news worthy events.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Social Responsibility theory. The major premise of the theory is that freedom carries concomitant obligations, and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is expected to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication. This much McQuail (2005) acknowledged in his presentation of the main principles of the social responsibility theory as follows:

1. That media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society
2. That through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met
3. That media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities
4. That whatever might lead to crime, violence, civil disorder or offence to minority groups, should be avoided by the media
5. That the media should reflect its society's plurality, giving access to various points of view and granting all the right to reply
6. Based on the principle in (1), the society has the right to expect high standards of performance from the media. Intervention can only be justified to secure public good.
7. Accountability of media professionals should be to the society, employers and the market

Thus, media content is a result of meticulous reporting that ignores unhealthy ideas or distasteful information that could be harmful to society. The Social Responsibility theory of the press maintains that the media have a moral obligation to safeguard social peace and stability and to create an informed citizenry. This obligation would be met through self-regulation of the media, media councils

and codes or ethics, as well as public opinions and consumer reactions. Consequently, while the media may be publicly or privately owned, government monitoring is allowed to ensure that it truly serves the people. Both media organizations and journalists are accountable for the contents they disseminate. The rationale for the use of this theory in this study lies in the moral obligation expected of the media to safeguard social peace and stability through professional handling of news and reports on religion devoid of undue sentiment that could lead to chaos and social upheaval that is inimical to the development of the society.

Media and the Challenge of Religious Consideration in Nigeria

There exist well over a hundred denominations in the Christendom as well as tens of sects in Islam with numerous houses of worship located in every nooks and crannies of Nigeria. This singular development in the country's contemporary religious space lends credence to the assertion by religious critics such as Makinde (1988) that Nigeria is a God intoxicated society. However, the peaceful co-existence among the diverse religious groups has gone awry over time. The rivalry and competition between Islam and Christianity in the socio-economic realm apart from their focus on religious evangelism has assumed a dangerous dimension to the extent that religious affiliation is often considered in matters of public interest such as political appointments and job placements etc.

Since journalists and the media they work for are part and parcel of the society to which they owe their existence, the politicization of religion and its attendant manipulation also serves as influencer either directly or indirectly with respect to the discharge of their professional responsibilities. This unfortunate scenario could be seen in the tone of their news reportage, writings and commentaries which runs against professional ethics they swear to uphold. This forms the major focus of this paper.

The Nigerian media have come a long way since 1859 and have performed creditably in its traditional functions of informing, educating, entertaining its audience as well as surveillance of the environment. This is in addition to serving as a major tool of nationalist struggle for independence from the British colonial rule in 1960, after which it assumed the role of the watch dog, in the process, taking the successive governments to task on accountability to the Nigerian people. Jibo (2003, p.4) aptly puts the responsibility of the press as helping the elite and the broad masses to articulate their views and positions on political issues and public policies as well as helping the average listener or reader to make meaning out of an otherwise complex phenomenon which is beyond comprehension." Sambe (2009) also captures and portrays the functions of the media thus:

The media also serve the collective cultural, political and economic needs of the society. The press possesses the power to work within a political system or work against it. The media system can oil and ease the economic wheels of a country or bring them to a grinding halt. In

the same vein, media can be used to monitor social equilibrium, facilitate change or to seek radical alternatives (p.229-228).

Despite the glorious roles attributed and carried out by the media, there is a general observation by media audience that news reporting is influenced by media owners and practitioners. The gathering, processing and presentation of news is one in the context of socio-economic, political and peculiar interests, including religion that exists in the government and private enterprise. The Nigerian press has often been criticized for many political ills that have befallen the nation either justifiably or unjustifiably due to the sensational manner that ethno- religion issues are reported most times which subsequently serves as trigger for attendant crises. One clear example in recent history is the press war against the current President, Muhammadu Buhari, whose presidential ambition was thwarted thrice during the 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections by politicians who manipulate the media to tag him as a “religious fanatic” that is bent on implementing sharia law all over the country if he is allowed to get to the seat of power.

There are many other past incidents, where the media had acted unwisely, and contributed sadly to the crises that arose thereafter. A case in point was the war of words spearheaded by the press before the firing of the first shot that ignited the country’s civil war in the 1960’s. In recent years, Nigerian media are said to have performed poorly in ethno-religious news coverage. Comments made by some participants at an interactive session organized by National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), as reported in Sheyin (2011) on the protracted Jos ethno-religious crises where journalists were accused of not being patriotic in their report of the particular crises would suffice. Haroun cited in Sheyin (2011, p.5) acknowledges the Chairman of the Plateau State Chapter of Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), who observed that:

People in and out of Jos are usually confused about the true position of things during crisis because the reports of each media organization are based on its peculiar sentiments. The reports are usually sensational; they fuel religious or ethnic hatred among the people and that jeopardizes national security. Incidentally, some journalists at the session agreed that some media houses through their reports have, indeed, promoted some parochial interests, instead of safe guarding the national interests.

Jonathan Ishaku, the General Manager of Standard Newspaper in Sheyin (2011) notes that:

Generally, you find a tendency where journalists’ reportage promote hate and further aggravate a crisis by playing up emotions that are usually destructive to national interests. Ishaku, author of the book “Boko Haram” particularly criticizes the way the media cover politics and religion, alleging that many reporters and editors usually found it difficult to

detach themselves from their personal sentiments... the situation has made it impossible for the average reader or listener to get the correct picture of the issues at stake; hence enlightened opinion is hardly brought to bear on very critical issues (p.6).

Another journalist, Yolah, an editor with the Leadership Newspapers cited in (Sheyin, 2011) lamented that some journalists had played “appreciable roles in misinforming the people, while sustaining the culture of hate and ignorance during crises (p.6). She states that the situation had turned journalists and the journalism profession into the subject of many derisive jokes, as many people now disparaged journalists as “liars”. Yolah urged journalists to be mindful of their expectations in the 21st Century civilization, while calling on the Nigerian Press Council, the National Broadcasting Commission and other regulatory bodies to always sanction erring journalists. The aforementioned instances where the media have behaved irresponsibly and sensationally have made Nigerians to find it difficult to trust news report in the media. This turn of events was as a result of realization that the mass media can be an obedient ‘servant’ but could also conversely, be a dangerous ‘monster’. It is against this backdrop that Ugboajah (1987) notes:

Political belief, media sector, professionalism, education, type of media (private or government), perception of the elements in the power structure, geographical location and traditionalism are crucial in influencing the media gate keepers attitude. An uncontrolled or unrestrained power of the media may yet spell the doom to democracy than the much talked about abuse of the executive and congressional power (p.51).

Apparently, sensational reportage in the Nigerian media seems to be in agreement with scholars’ postulation of the world being a free market place of ideas in which the journalistic dictum “write and be damned” was coined. But the application of such dictum in our body politics cannot help in development journalism that is in practice in Nigeria. This implies that care should be taken not to cause disharmony among the diverse ethno-religions groups in the country.

Some scholars have also argued for a responsible press in order to avert the frequent resort to sensationalism that create fertile ground for incessant crises of all kinds in Nigerian society. Akinfeleye (2003, p.62) belongs to this school of thought as he argues that if the Nigerian press will continue to play a significant role in our political, social and economic transformation, if the Nigerian press is to be given the well-deserved respect by the public, if the Nigerian press is to be truly the fourth estate of the realm and not the fourth estate of the wreck, this is the time to respect and work out a new agenda for adherence to the social responsibility of the press. He identifies the duties expected of the press in the 21st century thus: “let the press focus their activities and news

coverage and presentation in the new millennium more on the promotion, protection and preservation of our national interest and sustainable democracy.

In the same vein, Akinfeleye also outlines the duties expected of Nigerians as a sort of balancing the equation that will assist in creating a responsible press. In this wise, he cautions that the Nigerian society particularly the politicians, business men and women, the law enforcement agencies, the religious leaders, traditional leaders etc, must first of all be socially responsible before they can expect the press to be socially responsible, after all, the press is a product of its society.

Even though the media in Nigeria are guided in view of the aforementioned defined duties and responsibilities, the press owe society in the 21st century and its power to make or mar national cohesion and harmonious co-existence amongst the heterogeneous groups in Nigeria, an assessment of actual coverage of religious issues by the press against the background of ethical consideration is quite desirable in order to appreciate the thrust of this paper by Akinfeleye and other scholars to ensure that they do not derail from their responsibilities. Unfortunately, it appears the media are reluctant in this regard.

The Nigerian media have thus been polarized along ethnic, religion and tribal lines as news reports from the Northern part of the country are generally perceived as pro-north and pro-Islam, while those from the South are portrayed as pro-south and pro-Christian. This unfortunate trend in news reportage in the Nigerian media seems to begin to rear its ugly head at the time of independence, though, it was given subtle mention during the colonial period as a result of the anti-colonial posture of the local media then which was preoccupied with the fight for independence.

The post-colonial period, however, saw the subsumed cleavages and bias of the media manifesting. Ciboh (2007 p.36) alludes to this situation that the press that honed a coregent and belligerent tone against colonial government as common enemy prior to independent became partisan, divergent and solemnly harps on sectional integration. Thus, the advent of the fourth republic saw the media exposing their underbelly in the coverage of religion. Quadri (2000) notes that hardly a day passes without many of the print media publishing one negative report or the other on *shari'ah* depicting it in cartoons as unprogressive law and agent of disintegration in the country. This tone of reportage characterized the period when Zamfara State began the implementation of *Shari'ah* law in 1999. Ironically, most of these alarmists, myopic and uniformed reporters are found in the media owned by publishers of other religious persuasions.

In 2002, *This Day* newspaper, against all ethical considerations and peaceful existence as well as disrespect for the prophet of Islam and the feelings of the Muslims, carried an article written by Ishioma Daniel who opined that the prophet would have loved to marry one of the contestant for

MissWorld pageant which was billed to take place in the month of Ramadan of that year. The resultant protest that arose from this irresponsible and unprofessional practice led to the death of many lives in Abuja and Kaduna.

Kukah (1993) equally makes reference to a report put out by a Kaduna-based magazine, *Hotline* in December 1987 that all Christians had been released from jail following the riots supporting the view that the release was a miscarriage of justice. These “spurious allegations” were, according to Kukah, “determined to mislead the Special Tribunal set up to try those involved in the 1992 Zango-Kataf or create confusion.

Another virulent and alarming report involving a religious personality which exposes the Nigerian media’s irresponsible and parochial consideration in matters of religion resonates when *African Concord* magazine (1991) carried a cover story entitled: “The Mullah Set for War: Story of Ayatollah in Katsina” in its April 22, edition where Mallam Yakubu Yahaya was variously described as “puritanical” “a law unto himself”, and “a god” among his faithful. For a man who claimed his role models to be Prophet Muhammed and Jesus Christ, one wonders why the magazine wrote a scary and war mongering headline on the 36 years old Yakubu Yahaya in contrast to his peaceful disposition. Perhaps, the only offence of the Islamic cleric on whom ten pages were devoted by the magazine was the fact that he led his followers to cart away an edition of *Fun Times*, a cartoon strip magazine which had, as they alleged, poked fun at prophet Muhammed and Jesus Christ. This action by the magazine shows a brazen disregard for editorial judgment as the cover page caption left out the remote cause of the crises by the cleric and his followers and sensationally cast the headline to reflect the reaction rather than reflecting both the action and reaction accordingly.

Because of the flagrant disregard for balanced report in the media with regards to religion, some scholars have added them as among the interest groups that oil religious uprising in the country. Oboh (2008) states pointedly that:

Research has proven that most of the avoidable national crises we suffered in this country, especially from the religious beat, were not necessarily premised upon the nature of the events but the manner in which most of the events are reported. Development journalism does not permit sensationalism in news coverage, particularly when such news report has the potentials to undermine our national integration (p.4).

The apparent poor showing of the media has been attributed to some challenges. Fairclough (1989) in a study carried out to assess media performance on multicultural reportage states that lack of knowledge and lack of in-house training, are the major obstacles militating against ethno-religious news reportage. Fairclough, similarly discovers that majority of journalists reporting ethnicity and

religion (64%) that were interviewed are general reporters rather than beat reporters. This finding shows the lack of specialized treatment of religion in the media which ostensibly breeds ignorance and half-hearted attention given to religious news reportage. Other challenges journalists face in different phases of news production with regard to reporting on religious issues according to Fairclough include finding a news topic, approaching sources of information, providing background information and finding an angle of presenting a story. While some of these challenges are strictly those of the reporters, others relate to the media organization environment which, according to Buddherbaum (1998) are been dependent on the development of the media, size of the newsroom, editorial principles on reporting ethnicity and religion and the media's tendency to value all round journalistic skills higher than knowledge.

Thus, while journalists cherish values of objectivity, accuracy, fairness, balance amongst other critical considerations, Inezi (2008) observes that the media further negative stereotypes related to ethnicity and religion as reflected in the assertion made by Audu cited in Sheyin (2011) that media reportage during the Jos ethno-religious crises were sensational and that they fuel religious or ethnic-hatred among the people. This also goes to show that Nigerian media are equally guilty of not adhering to their social responsibility role in the society as well as setting the wrong agenda for public discussion.

The sometimes indiscretion by some media establishments in the reportage of religion as observed here are traceable to many operational challenges; both internal and external such as ownership factor, membership of religious groups, stereotyping, personal sentiments, lack of knowledge and in-house training. Beyond these aforementioned challenges, Rich (2011) added what he called "21st century skills" which includes collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem solving that can help journalists thrive in today's world. Yolah cited in Sheyin (2011) therefore, urges journalists to be mindful of their expectations in the 21st century civilizations.

Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the Nigerian media set the wrong agenda through negative representation of members of different ethno-religious groups. This is but a manifestation of poor training, mischief or outright ignorance on the part of the concerned journalists. Reportage of ethno-religious crises is often sensational, and capable of fueling religious or ethnic hatred among the people. This also goes to show that Nigerian journalists are equally guilty of not adhering to their social responsibility role in the society. It is obvious that religions consideration in news reporting though undesirable and unethical may not be easy to remove in Nigeria because the local press has been polarized along ethno-religions and cultural lines. But this is strongly against the principles of

journalism. It has often been canvassed that the media in a free enterprise market has to succeed first as a business in order to succeed as anything else but this line of thought most often constrain some media and journalists to pander to unethical practices (sensationalism) that tend to undermine the peace and security of the country.

This study concludes that the Nigerian media appear to be seriously divided in their stands on issues of national interest on the basis of several factors, with religion being the most prominent. This is against the principles of development journalism. Development journalism tasks journalists to live up to the expectations of building and sustaining peace, unity and development in the society. This call is very relevant for the Nigerian society that is grappling with a myriad of developmental challenges arising from its highly multi-ethnic cum multi-religious nature that make it a constant flashpoint of violent conflicts. To this end, personal and parochial interests of journalists must pave way for objectivity, fairness, balance, truth and accuracy in reporting religious related matters in order for the media to foster the desired unity and harmonious co-existence among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country.

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