

POLITICAL REPORTING IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA-AN OVERVIEW BY SHUAIBU USMAN LEMAN NUJ NATIONAL SECRETARY AT A TRAINING FOR JOURNALISTS IN KADUNA, ORGANIZED BY NUJ IN COLLABORATION WITH U.S EMBASSY IN NIGERIA MONDAY, 12 JANUARY 2015.

“The Media must always test the resiliency of the free speech and free press clauses by challenging any attempt to restrict their coverage of political activities and the society and by arguing passionately that the public has a right to know. This is as it should be, since a free press, even one that occasionally exceeds bounds of good taste is essential to the preservation of a democratic society....”

-- John W. Johnson

INTRODUCTION

The Journalist professionally has the responsibility for the collection, collation and publication of news. A direct result of this role is that they also influence public opinion as well as setting agenda for public action. Indeed, they galvanize the society towards identified public goals. In Nigeria's case, the media played the pivotal role in mobilizing the citizenry toward the national goal of establishing a democratic society even at the risk of their lives.

The journalist occupies a critical position in any media organization against the background of his professional responsibility. This role is more vividly understood when it is realized that the mass media offer the widest and fastest means of disseminating information. They influence opinion formation, perception building and social mediation. They act as a mirror with which the society can view itself while also influencing social realities. Indeed, they provide a free market for contending groups to express opinions or canvass support especially in a multi-party democracy like Nigeria. In this regard, it should be noted that the contest for dominance is highly intense and the journalist, more often, determines which opinion predominates.

Against the background of the foregoing, the journalists wield enormous influence on the nature and character of information disseminated to the electorate. Operating as gatekeepers, the journalists through their reportage and analysis of contemporary political

events and personalities define public perception concerning those events. Indeed, they set national political agenda as well as guiding public understanding of political issues.

ROLES OF THE MEDIA

In order to appreciate the nexus between the mass media and democracy, it should be noted that the most important ingredient of democratic practice is communicating ideas in order to attract voter's support. It is this nature of democracy that has thrown up critical challenges for media practitioners.

Democracy necessarily involves contending efforts by politicians to dominate the market of public opinion. The challenges of this to the journalists is the need to be equitable and balanced in the editorial management of news from diverse groups as well as the space allotted such news materials. This is even more during election when candidates of different political parties canvas for peoples votes.

A major feature of any democracy is the electoral process/ elections. It is the period in which the voters exercise their sovereignty through the power to vote. Election is therefore a tool for regeneration, rejuvenation and reinvigoration of the entire democratic system. It is thus important for the dynamic interaction within the political system. The role of the journalist within the system, especially against the background of his professional responsibility, cannot be emphasized. Apart from mediating between the contestants to political offices through fair reporting and space allocation, the journalist also influences the available choices of candidates to the voters. In essence, the journalist is highly influential in the process of the people deciding on whom to vote for in the election.

It is in appreciation of the foregoing that there has been a universal agreement that the journalist must be properly guided especially in the reportage of elections. Elections, it should be noted, are not ordinary events. Elections are normally conducted within the framework of an Electoral Law. The election law provides the foundation for other activities, including news reports, involving the electoral process. Several regulatory and professional bodies, taking a cue from the Electoral law, always introduce guidelines to guide many activities including media reportage of the election and the electoral process. Indeed, in the case of the media, the Nigeria Union of Journalists and other organizations

such as the Nigerian Press Organization, the National Broadcasting Commission, and the Guild of Editors have always agreed on strict guidelines for journalists covering the election. This is not peculiar to Nigeria. Indeed, it is a universal practice in all democratic countries.

Guidelines on election for the mass media underscore the universal appreciation of the important role of the journalist as news managers through whose eyes the average reader or listener sees events. The point of departure of most election guidelines is the acknowledgement of the professional skill and competence of the journalist. The Guides, however, specify the legal framework under which the reportage of election news will take place. In addition, given the highly sensitive nature of elections and its importance especially in a multi-party democracy and multi-ethnic polity such as Nigeria, the election Guide seeks to provide very detailed and specific direction to journalists and media practitioners who have a responsibility to report on the election.

MEDIA OWNERSHIP

It should be emphasized that Election Guide for Journalist is especially critical against the background of the fact that the media sector in the country is dominated by politicians who have vested, and naturally conflicting interests on the outcome of the elections. This is however not a new trend. It had a historical foundation in the nationalist struggle for independence from the British colonial government during which the media and their practitioners deployed their potentials to effectively mobilize public opinion against the colonial government. It is this established rich tradition, coupled with a contemporary understanding of media power that has led to influential political actors to invest heavily in both the print and the electoral media while also deploying them in pursuance of their partisan political agenda. Clearly, media ownership tend to influence, or indeed, direct news management, hence the apparent partisanship of quite a number of media organizations in the country. Unbridled partisanship by news media in the reportage of news could however spell doom for our democracy and could generate avoidable conflicts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is very obvious that the media in Nigeria have given substantial coverage to politics in the country, yet it is glaring that much needs to be done to educate the citizenry so as to enable them make informed choices. A glance at the major Nigerian newspapers on daily basis or listening to Radio or watching TV will reveal for example, that barely 5 weeks to the conduct of the general election in the country very little is being said in the media of the 24 other political parties in the country. The media appeared more concerned about the two leading political parties-The PDP and APC. Much more should be done to highlight the other 24 registered political parties even when most of them may not have Presidential Candidates.

The elections are not just for the President alone but there are equally other important political offices being vied for. Another aspect of urgent need for the media is the issue of educating both citizens and members of the political class of the dangers in using hate language in politics. Indeed the political parties code of conduct 2013, adopted by the political parties themselves, states clearly that no political party should make any inciting statements, no intimidation of opponents, no destruction of opponents posters etc. yet, on daily basis, the media channels are filled with such virulent comments about political parties or actors. The media need to do more in ensuring that such acts are curtailed.

Money in politics. It is an offence to use public funds or resources to finance political activities. What we witness on daily basis is the blatant use of government funds/resources to pursue political interests. While some segments of the media have in various ways tried to expose politicians behind such practices, much more must be done by all segments of the media to expose such Unhealthy trends.

The media carry out a number of important, even essential tasks in a contemporary society and it is in the general interest that these are performed and performed well. It also implies that we should have a media system that is operated according to the same basic principles governing the rest of the society, especially in relations to justice, fairness, democracy and reigning notions of desirable social and cultural values. It is clearly in the public interest

that the media do not cause social problems or extreme offence. But the idea of public interest also involves positive expectations.

This simple notion does not take us very far in practice. The first problem encountered is that most media are established not to serve the public interest as such but to follow some goals of their own choosing. The goal is sometimes defined in cultural, professional or political terms but more often it is the goal of making profit as a business. Sometimes, it is both at the same time. This points to the key issue of determining just what the public interest might be and of who should decide it

We should strive primarily to ensure international best practices as well as promoting the basic journalism principles of objectivity and fairness. This will certainly reduce the influence of partisan ownership on professional journalism output. In essence, we must ensure that in the intense competition between ownership control and journalism practice, the latter prevails.

I am indebted to the following references for the above insights and write up.

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