

Objectivity, Sycophancy and the Media Reality in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the familiar yet peculiar African political scene, where, from country to country, military dictatorships struggle (without real success), at wearing smiling faces; or where democracies strap on such full armour as to brook no opposition, this article discusses objectivity in the media.

Objectivity is the state or quality of not being influenced by personal bias, prejudice, feelings and opinions. Objective news-reporting is that which is devoid of inferences, judgement and slanting. Yet modern journalism is not altogether a professional practice in which the operators become, simply, automatons - unthinking, unfeeling and

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without emotion. Objectivity is thus a relative term - relative to the system that exists.

The position adopted by this article is that objectivity in news presentation is not a myth, nor a mere philosophical abstraction, but an attainable media goal which the journalist must strive for, even in the face of opposing realities.

Six factors which the journalist and the media must grapple with, if objectivity is to be meaningful and a worthwhile journalistic pursuit, are presented.

Objectivité, Flagornerie et la Réalité des Médias au Nigeria

RESUME

Contrairement à le toile de fond de la scene politique Africaine familière mais singuliere où d'un pays à l'autre les dictatures militaires luttent (sans grand succes) pour avoir un visage souriant; ou bien où les démocraties entretiennent toute une armée pour ne pas souffrir d'opposition, cette article parle de l'objectivite dans les média.

L'objectivité est un état ou une qualité ou on n'est pas influencé par un point de vue personnel, un préjugé, des sentiments et des opinions. Un reportage objectif c'est celui qui, évite les déductions, le jugement, la partialité. Bien sûr le journalisme moderne n'est pas entièrement une pratique professionnelle où les operateurs deviennent tout simplement des automates, incapables de penser, sentir et sans émotion. L'objectivité est alors un terme relatif.

La position adoptée dans cet article c'est que l'objectivité dans la présentation des nouvelles n'est pas un mythe, ni une simple abstraction philosophique, mais un but de media qui peut être atteint et pour lequel le journaliste doit lutter même en face des réalités opposantes.

Les six facteurs auxquels le jouranaliste et les medias doivent s'attaquer, pourque l'objectivite ait un sens et soit digne d'être poursuivi sur le plan journalistique, y sont présentés.

Introduction

Objectivity in the collating and presenting of news is the goal of the reporter, and a major principle of journalism. In spite of the fierce competition among newspapers, news magazines, radio, television, or wire services, in regard to who gets a story first and is fastest in making such news items public property, objectivity in the disseminating of news is acknowledged as a significant hallmark of modern journalistic practice.

It must be recognized that since the dawn of media history, there have been two opposing currents of thought concerning media objectivity - on whether objectivity is good or bad, and whether it is even possible.

The first claim (and a strong one) is that objectivity in news reporting is a myth, and theoretically speaking, a mere abstraction. In absolute terms, objectivity is said to be unattainable since it does not really exist. The proposition is stretched further to indicate that what is impossible, what is non-existent, need not be attempted because such attempts inevitably would prove unnecessary, unrealistic, as well as futile.

From the philosophical premise of such logic, subjectivization of news content, or subjectivity in news reporting (which in the literature is often called "interpretative journalism") would appear the only sensible, and realistic position or attitude open to the journalist.

The second, and no less popular school of thought indicates that objectivity in news reporting is a definitely attainable goal, but that one must strive for it even in the face of opposing realities. Adherents of attainable objectivity in the media claim that the reporter need not shy away from his prejudices, pre-conceptions, feelings and ambitions. He need not pretend to be an automaton - unthinking, unfeeling, unemotional; "saying it as it is", with bland facts

and figures, and no analyzing nor interpreting. Rather, the journalist is to struggle to place under leash his biases.

From this stand-point come arguments that since subjectivity is to be avoided, and since absolute objectivity might not be possible except as a target, the media professional can go a long way to being objective by sticking, as much as possible, to what Severin & Tankard (1979:63) have explained as "verifiable statements" (reports). This involves the excluding of *inferences, judgement and slanty reporting*.

The weekly news magazine (such as Nigeria's 'Newswatch', 'This Week', 'African Guardian') unlike the daily newspapers, is a comparatively recent development in the media world of surveying the environment; of correlating the various parts of society in regard to the environment; of transmitting the social heritage from one to the other generation; and of entertaining the various groups that form the society.

By its nature, style, content, goal and production process, the weekly news-feature magazine will have problems with clearly defining objectivity. Facts, the classic statement says, are sacred and comment free. And the law and canons of journalism recognize and allow for 'fair comment', by the media, on persons or issues affecting society. But the question is how to quantify fairness, and from whose point of view?

It is hardly a wonder that in an attempt to circumvent the intricate problem of not being objective enough or of becoming unduly subjective, some media professionals have advocated a seemingly new kind of journalism.

From Alan Casty (1973:193) are presented a sampler. They form a part of Theodore Peterson's paper on social responsibility:

- (i) the newspaper should ignore the trivialities of the penny press and the political bondage of the partisan press.
- (ii) the newspaper should not be politically neutral but neither should it owe allegiance to any political party of faction. Rather, it should furnish political leadership by setting the public good above duty to party.
- (iii) in 1904, Joseph Pulitzer in defending his proposal for the acquisition of academic sanctity, appealed

also to journalists to place public duty above duty to the counting-room.

These, according to Peterson, are traces of a growing sense of social responsibility and an acknowledgement that the newspaper and indeed any media, had some duty to the public.

What Then is Objectivity?

Most dictionaries say that it is a state or quality of being uninfluenced by personal bias, personal prejudice, feelings, or opinion.

Objective news is therefore news that is undistorted by personal prejudice. It is news that is fair, accurate, and factual. Nevertheless, it is not news that has been gathered and presented by an unthinking, unfeeling professional.

Objective news is devoid of inference, judgement, and slanting (Severin & Tankard 1979:65).

The journalist is a product of society. The African society with its various facets - traditions, beliefs, images, goals, constraints etc - must inevitably influence, and be influenced upon by the journalist. He helps to shape the size and direction of what is communicated to the different publics of the media. They in turn set his own agenda; what he selects to communicate.

This dual yet interactive role has its implications for the constant barrage of charges of bias, prejudice, partisanship, untruth and especially sycophancy leveled against the media and its staff.

Let us elucidate one of the gravest of the many charges:

Sycophancy

Babatunde Jose and the *Daily Times* of Nigeria are like the two sides of one coin. Jose who spanned over 30 years in the media, rose from being a cub-reporter to editor and, later, the Managing Director of the *Daily Times*. He claims that most media establishments in Africa have petered into slavish and virtually sycophantic mega-phones of the government or of the party in control.

Sycophancy is a rather strong and derogatory concept. When mentioned, it immediately conjures grotesque images and mental associations of negative social attitudes and deviant behaviour. Sycophancy is inevitable in any society where powerful and lasting bonds of group unity and cohesion are grossly lacking.

There are always sycophants in the midst: media men and women who, having abdicated their sacred duty, oath and trust, play up to the gallery; journalists whose actions and attitudes appear or actually are sniveling and groveling.

Objectivity in news presentation, however much desirable, cannot thrive in climates peopled by such characters. But they exist because the society made them so, having forced them into its mould. 'The people get the media it deserves' becomes appropriate here.

Sycophancy has degree or level. It also has magnitude, direction and effect. Sycophancy thrives mainly where the unbridled wielding of political, social or economic power and authority by only a few, over the large majority, is strong, perpetual, and seemingly unchallengeable. Such situations, over time, provide quiet breeding grounds for violent political revolutions. The media in such geographical entities more likely are organs of the ruling class. Press subjugation will not be uncommon.

Judged from a Western technological stand-point, most African countries in spite of decades of genuine attempts at social changes, still have very high levels of illiteracy, and an equally high degree of ignorance and superstition. Often these three factors (and others) thrive side by side with abject poverty, disease and squalor. Attempts at democratic governance, or variants of it, have almost always failed. The failure has often resulted in varying forms of dictatorship: from the benign (on the one extreme of the continuum) to the intolerably totalitarian (at the other end).

In political climates of this nature, media sycophancy becomes no less a dominant factor of journalistic endeavour than the type and posture adopted by the body in power. Thus, the degree of subjectivity of media processes and products will probably be in direct proportion to the level of media sycophancy that exists.

The media are clearly recognized as having four major functions. The surveillance of the environment as well as the

analyzing and interpreting events in the environment form an important part. The degree to which the journalist exhibits sycophantic tendencies or actually plays the sycophant in his surveillance, analytic, and interpretative roles, is determined to a large extent by what type of constraints, bias, prejudice or personal opinions he has. Therefore, the journalist is objective only to the extent to which he is not unduly influenced by personal bias, prejudice or other extraneous constraints.

Personal bias and constraints could stem from one or a combination of factors. We shall now consider a few of the major ones and endeavour to relate them mainly to the African reality.

1. political non-neutrality
2. financial and job insecurity
3. the journalist's cosmology
4. prevailing social prejudice
5. idiosyncrasy

The journalist in Nigeria, as in any African nation, does not operate in a social or political vacuum. He, as a part of the pluralistic group, internalizes its norms and mores, and interacts with other members on various levels and in different dimensions. One of the bones of effective journalistic practice is for the professional or his media not merely to have political leanings, but to be subtly or grossly influenced by party politics. Professionally, it is ideal that the journalists be politically neutral (i.e. politically non-partisan), so that his basic function of fact finding and the giving of facts is not compromised.

Unfortunately, however, party politics in Nigeria, as in most African states, is yet to be based on soundly political ideological considerations devoid of ethnic chauvinism. All too often, factors based on monetary gratifications and cultural and religious sentiments, govern the establishment of political parties; control the policies and dynamics of the parties; and the determination of acceptable party membership.

The Nigerian journalist is a part of this rather complex social set up, being perhaps more influenced by it, than he influences or can influence it.

Experience in fact indicates that there are many Nigerian journalists who play the sycophant in one form or another. Professionally we make loud claims to being politically non-partisan, but the reality is far from the claims.

Apart from the danger, to the ethics of journalism, of the professional courting party politics and therefore becoming no longer professionally objective, sycophancy could emanate from another source: The journalist may have a harassing sense of financial and job insecurity.

All news activities are based on policy no doubt. And in most media, policy exists as written or unwritten laws, and these differ (though not markedly) from one media establishment to the other.

All who will remain, progress, or receive commendation, in one form or another, in the media they work, must thoroughly understand the style-book and general guidelines on how events are not only to be reported, but are to be interpreted and analysed. Becker and Lee (1979:78) have observed:

If certain kinds of stories are edited heavily, cut in length, or simply not run, the reporter learns that some policy probably exists regarding those stories. Conversely, reporters receive positive feedback in the form of prominent displays of stories and favourable comments. This positive feedback serves as the reward for following policy.

According to the authors, reporters and editors have several reasons why even against their conscience, they follow the policy of their media establishments. The first and most obvious is the fear of actual dismissal. Lack of promotion or actual demotion are lesser fears but are important too. Thus, professionals toe their media line because they aspire to higher positions.

There are far more government-owned media in Nigeria than there are privately-owned. A journalist having to work for the private media whose ownership and control bear distinct association with policies or ideologies of a ruling military junta, or of a controlling political party in government, may be forced against his better judgement to

slater virtually all the news items and features in favour of or in conformance with his employers' wishes. A sound bite of sympathy is thus forced upon the journalist.

In another notable instance the fact that all the radio and all the television establishments in Nigeria are entirely owned either by the federal or some state government (and they do their own most newspapers too) unavoidably determines so that the Nigerian journalists some level of sympathy and bias.

This makes it imperative that the media staffs either follow the lead of the policy of the controlling body failing which they should voluntarily quit the establishment to be under no more compulsion removed from a particular position.

It is common experience that in Nigeria a proprietor of a station has to suffer from imposed 'defeating' media staffs through the use of what media proprietors of the desert are said to call a 'organization' or 'staff' which 'exercises'.

In such a situation the editor of a newspaper, or the programme producer for a particular radio or television station is simply reassigned to another role within the organization such that the editor is rendered completely incapable of attempting further with the media policy the earlier one in mind. He becomes so to say, effectively silenced. If he is however not reassigned he is usually fired from the establishment, resulting in occasional investigations that could drag on for years, litigation that before received wide coverage from media that do not support the government or the party in power.

A case in point is the Nigerian television staff member Vera Ifeoluwa who sued the Federal Government of Nigeria for her removal from office and successfully received redress.

Another example is that of Peter Ajayi the Managing Director of *The Daily Sketch* Newspaper who sought and obtained redress from the court for being removed from office as editor of the state government paper *The Nigerian Herald*. It was however a pyrrhic victory.

Many staffs are unable to seek redress in court where they feel their rights have been unduly infringed upon. Some who ever go to the court either do not get a favourable account of financial and other constraints, or do not receive a fair hearing should the legal courses be taken, or with by powerful and unscrupulous personalities in the society.

There is yet another dimension to this picture about media ownership and control on account of which the journalist is farther from the ideal.

Frequently, the journalist in Nigeria slants his news and plays up (or plays down) reported events, because he is unwilling to offend or hurt those who sustain, as it were, the life blood of his media. Newspapers, more than any other media, rely greatly on the patronage of advertisers. The inference is that those advertising patrons must not be offended.

A third reason for which the professionals in many of Africa's print and broadcast media are often charged or accused of bias, stems from the journalist's cosmology. His perception of events around him unintentionally (or even deliberately) could be coloured by some prevailing social prejudices. The pressman, if even for journalistically ethical reasons, distances himself from the society in which he is allowed to operate, cannot be expected to function in a social vacuum. He cannot but imbibe its norms and internalize its culture at least to some extent. How far the extent is a moot point. But to absolutely obtain or ferret information is to become, with time, a social misfit. If he is a misfit in the culture, he is likely to be distrusted and daubed a snub even if revered for his pen and the power of his pen.

There is a rather strong religious prejudice in the Nigerian society today. The prevailing disquieting religious atmosphere is not unconnected with the raising by a deliberateness of action of religion to a lofty national pedestal. While the federal government constantly says that no state religion will be imposed on Nigerians, the nagging worry has appeared to be based on the many common evidence (in the newspapers, magazines; on the television and radio) that show religion as not being de-emphasized to make Nigeria a truly secular state. The other side of the argument is equally strong. It goes like this: since religion is a dominant factor of life for most Nigerians, it should deliberately and thoroughly be encouraged, except that no state religion shall be adopted or imposed on the country, if it is to remain, as it ought to, a truly secular state.

It is the second argument above that forms the basis of the initial statement that religion has unwittingly been raised to rather lofty national heights. For this reason, many

journalists in Nigeria have looked at many aspects of the Nigerian reality from the coloured lenses of the prevalent religious prejudices.

Idiosyncrasies

Apart from the effect, on journalistic practices, of prevailing social prejudices, a lack of objectivity in presenting news may arise from the journalist's personal idiosyncrasies, personality, and aspirations.

Every person has a personal world-view and one or more peculiarities. The media professional is no exception. He may remain motivated by apparently fortunate circumstances and events, to reach for lofty journalistic heights. He might, on the contrary, be goaded on in his work, out of the nagging fear of possible failure as a press-man. The desire to protect or project his personality may become a strong ambition. These three extricably linked personal factors may, and often unintentionally do, influence his degree of objectivity in the gathering and presenting of news.

Objectivity and Media typology

Objectivity in the media is relative to the type of media system obtaining in any particular country.

The classic often-quoted Siebert-Peterson-Schramm theory or typology of media systems describes four types. Each type has its organ of control and programme policy. Control has to do with media ownership, financing, staffing and feedback mechanism. We shall quote copiously from Alan Wells (1974:6).

The *Libertarian* type is said, by Western analysis, to have the system with the most free press in the world. America, Britain and most Western countries operate the *Libertarian* media system. The principle of objectivity in news reporting, and freedom from restraints on programming, are jealously guarded. But there are charges that biased journalism also obtains even among *Libertarian* journalists. For example, it is common knowledge that a section of the British and American media, respectively, became politically non-neutral and was instrumental in the re-election of Margaret Thatcher (the British Prime Minister) and of Ronald Reagan

(the American President). Thus the press is often used and is often manipulated by pressure groups.

The *Soviet Communist* media type obtains in the Soviet Republics. The press is financially dependent on organizations that promote Soviet ideology. Media control is absolutely by the Government - the Communist Party. Criticism of government policies or officials, by the press, is unthinkable because, the editor, himself a certified member of the ruling part and management team, is especially concerned that his publication or broadcast win acceptance from his peers or superiors. From the Western World's point of view, there is no press-freedom in Russia and therefore it follows that there can be no objectivity in news reporting there.

The *Social Responsibility* media system is normally found in the Anglo-American countries. The press is usually under the control of organizations responsible to the public. There is an over-riding emphasis, in the media programmes, on transmitting public information and issues of public interest. It should however be noted that the style of programming (that upholds the principles of objectivity in news reporting) is seen as more important than control over the media itself.

The *Authoritarian* press obtains mostly in developing and underdeveloped countries. Countries of Africa, Asia and some in Latin America have Authoritarian Media.

Usually press-freedom in such a situation is an illusion. The media are private or public yet subordinate to the state. Programme censorship is a strong characteristic feature. Criticism of government policies is not particularly tolerated.

The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria is a developing nation, and at different times in her chequered history, has sustained presses that were partly Totalitarian (Soviet-Communist type), Libertarian, Social Responsibility type, Authoritarian.

In Nigeria, private and publicly-owned media thrive side-by-side. And there are varying degrees of 'privateness' and 'publicness'. Objectivity in the media, is a relative term in Nigeria because governments are ever changing, ever alternating between the military and the civilian. Even the

civilian governments have kept displaying shifting political bases. The Nigerian journalist is therefore objective in his presenting of news only to the extent to which he is or has been free of censorship (from State or National governments), free from media-owner control, free from personal biases.

Nigeria has 32 English-medium daily newspapers; 26 weekly newspapers, in English; about 60 English-medium magazines; 29 radio stations and 33 television stations.

The question of who owns and controls what media in what place and at what time therefore determines to a large extent, the degree of objectivity of news reporting in Nigeria.

It is common knowledge that at one stage in the life history of the owner and publisher of *The Concord* newspapers, Chief Abiola was more than merely a staunch member of the defunct ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN). *Concord* having received the blessings of the ousted Shagari government, was said to have been set up as a mouth-piece of the political party, and to counter the vitriolic vituperations of all other opposing political parties (especially of the Unity Party of Nigeria-UPN). At another stage, when (shortly before the 1983 elections) Abiola withdrew from party politics, his newspaper, so to speak, changed gear. It claimed to have become politically neutral. So, we see the media, in the hands of very powerful, determined and talented persons, are easily manipulatable for good or ill, and as easily forced to cower into sycophantic roles.

Kalu (1984) made an empirical study of *The Concord* claims by comparing the objectivity levels of the three independent newspapers in their coverage of the 1983 Presidential elections. Empirically, *The Concord*, in comparison with other *Independent* newspapers, appears to have had a veneer of objectivity or political neutrality in its news coverage of the 1983 Presidential elections. Empirically how objective *The Concord* is, during the present (Babangida) military era, will no doubt make an interesting study. But a rather casual study of news broadcasting and news published over television and radio networks, or in newspapers, today, gives one the impression that there is no freedom to broadcast or publish, and what news is presented does not probe issues deeply enough. The press is in a season of silence now. The drums look muffled and the media muzzled by no obvious laws against them from the ruling government.

Conclusion

For these reasons, Nigerian journalists are not objective. They dare not be objective because the present era is not a democratic era. It is military. And a military government is an aberration although cynics also say that it is the civilian regimes in Nigeria that are aberrations.

The Nigerian media, purported to be the most free in Africa, take their roots from the Nigerian society. The Nigerian society is and has always been a mixed grill - a complex almost ungovernable conglomeration of people with mutual yet exclusive social traits (religious, political, cultural prejudices and distinctiveness). Furthermore, there are over 300 language groups, with a shocking disparity between the rich and the poor, and between the educated and the illiterate. Job security and job satisfaction, for the working majority, are uncertain. Graduate unemployment is high; jobs are scarce, and the economy is a shambles.

The Nigerian journalist is a part of all these complexities. Whether or not he works in a 'private' or 'public' media during a civilian or military era, and whether or not the private media-owner has political or religious leanings, and other biases, the journalist cannot isolate himself from society nor work in a vacuum. Therefore until the day comes when news is presented by an unthinking, unfeeling, unemotional automat, there will be charges of bias. But it is unlikely that the day will ever come.

What the media need to do is to recognize their limitations on account of the realities and constraints they have to grapple with. Then they should keep striving towards objectivity because it is not only attainable, it is the better choice open to the journalist.

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