

## **Freedom of information and media literacy in information management for national security in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

In 2011, former President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria signed the Freedom of Information Bill (FIB) to make journalists and other stakeholders of information management to have access to information without any fear or favor. Since the signing of the bill, journalists and other media practitioners have been exercising their right to freedom of information. For effective information management, there is a need for media literacy for consumers of media contents. This paper, therefore, argues that despite the freedom of information in the country, there is a need for media literacy for effective management of information for national security in Nigeria. This argument is premised upon the fact that interpretation and analysis of information is subjective owing to some personal prejudices and biases of the consumers of information. The lingering insecurity engineered by BokoHaram insurgency, kidnapping and armed militancy in the country is linked to the level of information management. The scope of the paper covers print media owing to the fact that data can be easily gathered from newspapers and magazines for analysis and discussion.

**Keywords:** *Media literacy; freedom of information; BokoHaram; Information management; print media*

### **Introduction**

It is an aphorism that information is power and that consolidation of position of power and authority requires access to information. For individuals, corporate organizations and countries to survive in the complex human and group relations, there is a need for the adequate access to and management of information. The access to information can be formal or informal, structured or unstructured as well as raw or refined. What is, however, important is the cognitive and interpretive ability of the participants in the course of

communication.

The nature of Nigeria's constitution stresses the significance of reliable information in national development. The constitution places some importance on the need to share information among people of different ethnic nationalities to add value to national cohesion and development. With the significance of information in national cohesion and development, the government of Nigeria has put machineries in place to ensure freedom of individuals and groups in sharing and management of information and hence, the term freedom of information.

This paper, in its argument, is of the view that the term freedom is relative. What is free in one context may not be free in another context. By extension, what constitutes freedom of information in a context may constitute a breach or violation of the rights of another individual. To this end, there is no universal yardstick to measure freedom of information. What is important in the conceptualization of freedom of information is that information management is seen as a vital tool in sustainable human and national development.

Therefore it is important that how the consumer of media content interpret and analyze information, particularly news and other vital information that affect the continued existence of the country and contributes in maintaining peace and harmony in the social matrix within which the media operate. The production and consumption of news items are influenced by some ethical standards and subjectivity. It is owing to this reason that there is a need for media literacy in the management of information disseminated by the media outfits irrespective of the nationalities and continents of the globe.

Information mismanagement in terms of perversion of truth and undue negative propaganda is instrumental to strained relationship among people and individuals that make up a nation or country. Media outfits, therefore, are expected to be proactive and positive in the way they manage new items for public consumption. In the light of information management through effective information management, the paper argues that the factor of subjective news reportage cannot be overlooked. What the media outfits need to do is to regulate the extent of subjectivity in their news coverage and reportage for peace and harmony in a country and at the same time, to promote the ethical standards of the press.

### **Freedom of information in Nigeria**

The *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* states that every individual has the right to freedom of expression irrespective of ethnic nationality, gender, political affiliation and religious beliefs. This is meant to ensure that there is equity and fair play in the way information is accessed and assessed. For justice to prevail in democratic governance in the country, individuals are expected to give and receive information without fear and favor. On the freedom of expression and press, the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria states:

- i. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.
  
- ii. Without prejudice to the integrity of subsection (i) of this section, every person shall be entitled to own, establish and

operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions.

The above constitutional provision on the freedom of expression and press sets the foundation for the current freedom of information. The gap between the theory and practice of freedom of expression in Nigeria's political sphere makes individuals demonstrate fear in the sharing of information and ideas that affect political functionaries and those that hold public offices.

The shortfall in the realization of the freedom of expression, as provided in Nigeria's constitution, prompted the movement and passage of the bill on freedom of information to enable the populace access to information without fear and favor. The FIB got its transformation into an act with the assent of President Goodluck Jonathan. In the year 1999, the FIB was sponsored by the Media Right Agenda (an NGO) and since then it had faced so many trials that nearly killed it (Sesan, 2011 p. 1). The bill had a tortuous passage because of the misconception that the bill, if eventually becomes an act, will empower the media to probe unjustly the activities of the government functionaries and public office holders. *The Punch* Newspaper (2011) comments on the reasons for the tortuous passage of the bill that, "Much of the opposition that initially stalled the bill's passage at the parliament emanated from the misconception that it was a Media Bill that will empower pesky journalists to unearth the dark secrets of public servants. To some lawmakers, it was as though they were signing away their rights to sharp practices and corruption. Hence, they were determined to stifle the bill." (June 15, 2011)

The bill had a problem during its passage because the stakeholders,

particularly the lawmakers, had the fear of the unknown. In their self-centered opinion, the passage of the bill and the eventual ascent to it will expose their corrupt practices in the house. The freedom of information act will afford journalists and other media practitioners access to information and hence, the lawmakers see the act as their albatross. One of the important goals of the freedom of information for journalists is the justice for media practitioners in the course of their duties. Prior to the era of freedom of information act, journalists and media practitioners have been subjected to series of victimization, humiliation and dehumanization instituted by the government and its apparatuses. Journalists, editors and media practitioners such as KunleAjibade, Irabor and NosaIgiebor were fortunate to live to tell their tales of years of brutalization and incarceration. DeleGiwa, one of the victims of the state terror against investigative journalism and news reportage, never lived to tell his tales.

Before the era of freedom of information, Nigerian government, through various decrees and legislations, has made efforts to limit/censor the scope of operation of the press and media practitioners. The resultant effect of this censorship on the activities of the press is the subjective news reportage. Among the decrees, acts and ordinances that are put in place to fetter the press in the past were Defamation Act, 1961; Official Secret Act, 1962; Seditious Meeting Act, 1961; O; Public Officers ( Protection Against False Accusation) Decree No 11,1976; Newspaper (Prohibition of Circulation) Decree no 12, 1978, Nigerian Press Council Decree No 31,1987, News Watch (Proscription and Prohibition from Circulation) Decree no 6 of 1987

and The News (Proscription and Prohibition from Circulation) Decree of 1993. The essence of these decrees and promulgations is to ensure that there is a limit to information that is available to popular consumption. Then, the press and media practitioners were operating in the climate of fear and terror. The common experiences of journalists and media practitioners of the period are; incarceration with no or delayed trials; closure of the media outfits or press organizations; destruction of the material and immaterial properties of the press organization; humiliation and victimization of journalists, reporters and other media practitioners.

The above situations delineate media activities of the past from the way they are today. Journalists, in the past, were endangered species in the course of their official, professional duties. Thus, the fear of humiliation and unpleasant experiences used to make journalists color news bulletin for public consumption. The paper corroborates the view of Adeyemi (2006, p. 151-161) that press censorship is not peculiar to Nigerian government alone. It was a practice among the governments across the countries and continents of the globe. The critic observes that the press has always been under close scrutiny of government throughout the world. The press is the fourth estate of the realm, and has the responsibility of monitoring the activities of the government and holding it accountable to the people it is supposed to serve. Throughout the history of mankind, governments are known not to be comfortable with this responsibility of the press. The history of the hostility could be traced to the ancient Greece and such relationship featured prominently in subsequent civilizations.

The reason for the situation above is that government feels uncomfortable with the press as the fourth estate of the realm. By the normal ethical standard, the press is the conscience of the government and the consciousness of the governed.

There are some benefits of freedom of information act, in the current dispensation. These benefits cover both the private and the public domains of activities. Sesan (2011, p.4) observes four important ways through which freedom of information is beneficial to individuals, journalists, media practitioners and the country at large. His observations are as follows:

- i. Journalists, reporters and other practitioners have their dignity and human rights protected in the course of performing their duties. Journalist and reporters will no more suffer from harassment, brutalization and humiliation while discharging their duties. With the Freedom of Information Act, Journalists and media practitioners can now perform their duties without fear and favor.
- ii. It gives people and journalists due access to some classified information and 'top secrets'. This will reduce the level of secrecy attached to public administration.
- iii. It promotes accountability and probity in governance. The political office holders will be more conscious of the fact that their official impunity has limit because the electorate have access to query whatever they might have done in office.
- iv. It promotes security in the country. With the Freedom of Information Act, Nigerians now have chance to report criminals and criminality within their neighborhood to the security agents without fear of indictment or incarceration. Most Nigerians in the past were

not always willing to give tip off to the police because of indictment or false allegations.

The fourth point, in the position of Sesan, is relevant to the concern and scope of this paper. With the freedom of information, if properly implemented, there will be reduction in the rate of criminalities that affect national security in the country. For effectiveness of freedom of information act in the country, there is a need for proactive data collection, processing and management to promote national security.

**Media literacy in media information management:**

The kernel of freedom of information is how much learning and maturity an individual can demonstrate in the management of information received for further action. The factor of subjective reportage, that is professionally unavoidable to some degree, has necessitated the need for media literacy in information management. The view of this paper is consistent with Fowler's (1991, p. 10) that, "Because the institution of news reporting and presentation are socially, economically and politically situated, all news is always reported from some particular angle. The structure of the medium encodes significances which derive from the respective positions within society of the publishing or broadcasting organizations."

From the above position, it is argued that sociological, political and economic variables account for subjective news reportage and hence, foster need for media literacy.

Media literacy is a phenomenon that emphasizes some degree of competence in the analysis and interpretation of media content. Hybels and Weaver II (2001, p.603) are of the view that media literacy



is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in all its forms –both print and non-print”. The view of Hybels and Weaver II suggests that media literacy covers both the print and the electronics media of news reportage. The media audience/consumers need to have the ability to sieve the news items for sustainable national security. This is because any mismanagement of information in the media can breach national peace, harmony and security.

Sesan (2013) offers some definition and description of media literacy. In his argument, he is of the view that the phenomenon of media literacy is multifocal and multidimensional as it addresses the issues of the media content, producers, consumers and media effects on the psycho-social behavior in the social matrix. In the discourse of media literacy, there is a concentric relationship among the media contents, media consumers/audience and the media effect. The media effect can sustain and/or breach human relations.

He further argues that the periscope of media literacy covers four categories of individuals which include the owner of the media organization; the government and/or its designated agencies; the media practitioners; and the media audience. These four categories of individuals determine the nature and quality of what is produced as the media contents.

The concern of this paper is on the media effect, as one of the components of media literacy in the view of Sesan. Media affects influence decisions and actions of individuals after an exposure or consumption of media contents within a specific time frame. The argument here is that media contents impact on the psyche of

individuals that consume media contents. Thus, when and how a news bulletin is reported will have far reaching effect on individuals and national security.

In the course of news gathering, editing and broadcasting in the print and electronic media, the practitioners need to be conscientious in the handling of the news items in order not to create tension across all the ethnic nationalities in the country. The timing and the manner of presentation goes a long way in the realization of media effects of any news item. For affective media literacy, the stakeholders in the production and consumption of media contents are expected to be proactive in the way these contents are handled.

Another important factor that necessitates media literacy is the proliferation of media outfits in the country. The recent phenomenon in the contemporary Nigerian media culture is the proliferation of different private radio and television stations across all the ethnic nationalities in the country. For instance, there are more than a dozen radio stations in Lagos, about ten radio stations in Ibadan and about seven radio stations in Ogun State. These media outfits are owned by the federal government, state government and private individuals that have the means to own and run a radio station. The proliferation of radio stations may be attributed to the factor of media domination, a phenomenon that emphasizes the fact that an individual or a group has the potential to control and manipulate media contents for personal ends. The factor of media domination is peculiar to the government-owned media houses. The government in power always wants to dominate the activities of the press in order to consolidate itself in office. Srampickal and Joseph (2002, pp. 88-9) give the

rationale behind media domination that, “No one in a top position ever wants to lose that post. A person, who has tasted power once, has a tendency to cling on to it. Politicians thus become partners in the power game attempting to dominate the media while they are in power. The media are thus used to maintain the status quo. The media can never challenge the establishment.” But, with media power, all those who have vested interests in its control, make the ordinary citizen a mere puppet. It is tragic that people often do not even realize that they are being used as pawns in this game of media domination.

With the media literacy, the populace may come to awareness that the government uses media for its selfish gain. The government in power sees media as a political tool that can be used to suppress or manipulate public opinions and the rival political parties. In order to check media dominance of the government in power, individuals and groups with the means establish media outfits to counter the subjective news reportage of the government-owned media outfits. The proliferation of media outfits in the country has assisted in promoting ideal press that caters for the educative and informative needs of the populace. An ideal press, in a normal circumstance, aims at promoting the ethical standards of media reportage in order to reduce the extent of subjectivity. In this regard, an ideal press is promasses. The view of this paper on an ideal press as the process and product of media literacy is consistent with Bojuwade (1991, p.4) who maintains that the ideal press is the one that ethically takes care of the battered but unbowed baneful dogma, *‘He who pays the piper dictates the tune, but he doesn’t blow the pipe.’* The payer does it only for a

specific music. And the way to blow the pipe is within the professional wizardry of the journalist. He needs to function within his own ethical initiative in order to supply the music without a discordant note.

From the critical viewpoint of Bojuwade, it is argued here that an ideal press requires some media literacy for journalists, reporters and other media practitioners in order for them to be more efficient and proactive in the way they handle news broadcast for the consumption of the masses.

### **Information management, social responsibility: Theory and national security**

There are many mass communication/media theories that guide the operations of mass media practitioners across the globe. Among these theories is social responsibility theory. This theory has its genesis in America in 1947 with the efforts of Hutchins Commission on Press Freedom. The theory holds press to be socially responsible to the populace in the discharge of its responsibilities and duties. Media experts and mass communication scholars (Kunczick, 1988; p.48) have identified six major functions of the press which are; i) to serve political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible; ii) to inform and enable public to take self-determined action; iii) to protect the rights of the individual by acting as watchdog over the government; iv) to serve the economic system, for instance by bringing together buyers and sellers through the medium of advertising; v) to provide “good” entertainment, whatever “good” may mean in the culture at any point in time and; vi) to provide financial autonomy in order not to

become dependent on special interests and influences.

The six functions of the press, as identified above, are not peculiar to the western press alone. They are the tenets, applicable to the global media practices with specific reference to Nigeria. The tenets of this theory, no doubt, will contribute to the promotion of ethical standard of the Nigerian media if they are properly and carefully adopted in the course of the discharge of their duties. The position of this paper is consistent with the view of Folarin (1998, p. 29) who holds that Social Responsibility Theory is not a theory for the Western Press alone but for the press in all responsible societies. Quite naturally, the interpretation and the implementation of the theory's tenets will vary in line with any given social milieu.

Despite the variation in the application of the tenets of social responsibility theory, responsible governments across the globe allow freedom of press and information to make the press operate with no fear or favor.

It is quite unfortunate that media in Nigeria hype presentation of news and stories that are inimical to national security. The way these stories are hyped instigate or aggravate tension and crises in the country. Among the stories that are hyped in the media are terrorism, insurgency and kidnapping. In order to be socially responsible to the populace and the country, Nigerian journalists and media practitioners should be diplomatic and proactive in the manner of presenting stories that can endanger the fragile peace and security in the country. In situating the tenets of social responsibility theory to the Nigerian experience, three of the tenets are adopted and discussed in this paper. These three tenets include, to serve the

political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible; to inform the public to enable it to take self-determined action; and to protect the rights of the individual by acting as watchdog over government.

When the Nigerian media conscientiously utilize the above three tenets of social responsibility theory, there will be sanity in the way media information is disseminated to the masses.

The above three tenets take care of the media needs of government, the media content producers and the consumers of the media contents. The tenets revolve around the information needs of the country for national security. This paper proposes two media ethics for efficient and effective media coverage and reportage: i) information/data for news bulletin need to be investigated and verified before coverage and reportage; ii) the news bulletin should be valid and reliable in order not to misdirect and mislead the judgment of the populace and the government.

The populace requires some degree of literacy to be able to filter news items in order to justify their reliability and authenticity. In the recent time, there have been series of news reports on BokoHaram insurgency, kidnapping and other forms of criminalities that make lives and properties insecure. With the ways these acts of insecurity are reported, it is not easy to note the exact truth in the whole presentation. The insurgency of BokoHaram is consistent and persistent in Nigeria's political space owing to the way media report the incidence of insurgency. The manner of reportage of BokoHaram insurgency reported, has not reflected that the media is socially responsible to the populace and the government. One is unable to

determine which report is adequate and appropriate in the fight against the state of BokoHaram insurgency. The view of Oritseja for in the news bulletin of 'The Punch' of July 14, 2013 establishes the position that even if one person says "I want peace and I drop my weapons". I will ask, "Which BokoHaram?" We have seen situations in the past, where they told us that people wanted truce and the next day we saw people being killed.

The position of Oritsejafor suggests multiplicity of meaning that characterizes media reportage on the insecurity causes by BokoHaram insurgents. Different media outfits (the print and the electronic) approach the news reportage of the BokoHaram activities from different ideological perspectives owing to some socio-economic reasons.

This paper argues that for effectiveness of the fight against BokoHaram insurgents and other militancy in the country, there is a need for the government to involve the media in this total war. Through investigative journalisms and news reportage, media can expose some hidden facts about the insurgents and the militants. Besides, for every faceoff between the insurgents and the militants, journalists should be properly briefed. With the (relative) objective broadcast of the fight of federal government against insurgency and militancy, the psyche of the members of the insurgent and militant groups will be affected. Thus, this paper maintains that the media, through the exercise of freedom of information can help the federal government of Nigeria to wage a total psychological war against insurgence and militancy in the country. The paper argues further that if negotiations will bring insurgence in the country to an end,

media should be actively involved to document and report the proceedings to the populace. This will assist Nigerians to know the actual state of things in the fight against BokoHaram insurgency and any other acts of insecurity in the country.

Apart from addressing the information and educative needs of the populace and the country, media outfits also need to maximize profit for some other financial and economic needs. Based on this factor, the media outfits present their news stories in the best way that will satisfy the taste of their varied audience. Thus, this paper corroborates the view of Fowler (1991, p.20) that “newspaper industry is an industry and a business”. Fowler critically observes that what is overwhelmingly important is the fact that news-paper publication is an industry and a business, with a definite place in the nation’s and worlds economic affairs. It is to be expected, then that the activities and the output of the press will be partially determined by considerations related to this fact: by the need to make profit by economic organization of the industry; by its external relations with other industries, with financial institutions and with official agencies; by conventional journalistic practices; by production schedules; and by relations with labor. All these commercial and industrial structures and relationships are bound to have effect on what is published as news, and how it is presented.

It is in the light of the position of Fowler that this paper examines and discusses manner of presentation of the same news items by different newspaper industries in the country with specific reference to *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers.

Apart from the BokoHaram insurgents in the country, another major



security challenge that confronts the country is the abduction and kidnap of dignitaries and former and serving government functionaries. This paper draws data from the recent case of abduction and the eventual release of OluFalae.

On September 21, OluFalae, the former Minister of Finance and the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, was kidnapped from his farm in Ondo State. The abduction of this nonagenarian raised some critical issues in the media with individuals, groups and civil societies clamoring for the release of this old man. Newspaper industry began to run series of commentary and released different kinds of news bulletins on the causes, course and aftermaths of the abduction. Since the release of OluFalae, there had been controversies on the circumstances that surround the release. The Inspector General of Police (IGP) claimed that there was no ransom paid to the kidnapers to secure the release of OluFalae. The statement of IGP is given in *The Nation* of September 25 with the caption, 'Jubilation in Akure as abductors free Falae: No ransom paid, says IG.' The IG is quoted as, "No ransom was paid. The public will know as soon as we make any arrest. I assure you we will not rest, until we overcome this challenge". (p. 7).

In his own reaction, OluFalae stated that ransom was paid to his abductors. He was reported in *The Punch* of September 29 as, "A former secretary to the Government of the Federation, Chief OluFalae, on Monday admitted that 'certain amount of money' was paid as ransom before he was set free on Thursday by his abductors (p. 4).

There are controversies in the above mentioned news bulletin. The

way this can be averted is the involvement of the media. When the police are going for the rescue operation of the victim from the den of the abductors, they are expected to go with journalists and media practitioners to establish the truth of the situation to the populace. Journalists and media practitioners can fully enjoy freedom of information if they are involved in the socio-political matrix of the country.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has engaged freedom of information and media literacy in the promotion of national security. Issues on media literacy and information management are discussed in relation to the way it can promote national security. The paper adopts social responsibility theory as the theoretical framework. This theory is adopted based on the fact that it engages some media ethics that can guide journalists and media practitioners in the course of their professional duties. The paper suggests investigative journalism, reliability and validity of information for media coverage and reportage to improve the quality of news bulletin for public consumption. References are made to newspapers for analyses and discussion. The paper recommends that for reliability and validity of media information, journalists and media practitioners should be actively involved in the activities of the government since the media is seen as the fourth estate of the realm.

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