

Advocacy Journalism and the Rights of Nigerian Children to Free and Compulsory Education: A Prescriptive Approach

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of advocacy journalism in safeguarding the rights of Nigerian child to free and compulsory education is the thrust of this paper. It highlights the strategic importance of journalists to the smooth functioning and development of the society. The paper adopts the analytical tool in examining the imperatives of advocacy journalism in creating awareness to the non-compliance with the constitutional provisions and the different court orders guaranteeing and protecting the rights of the Nigerian child to free, compulsory and basic education. The Nigerian governments at all levels, policy makers, development agencies, non-governmental and community based organisations, though have made interventions to correct this anomaly, yet their efforts cannot be said to have yielded the desired results. This paper, therefore recommends that journalists who want to create a meaningful change, to adopt advocacy journalism as the single most crucial element to facilitate protection of rights of Nigerian Child to free and compulsory education.

Introduction and Theoretical Guide

The mass media generally, have a crucial role to play in the society. It is pertinent therefore to state that the cardinal principles of journalism, the genre notwithstanding, are passion for truth, social responsibility and public interest. Using these principles as standards, this discourse interrogates a phenomenally disturbing occurrence. The persistent non-compliance with the right of the Nigerian child to free and compulsory education, as well as its attendant, over-bearing and avoidable social stigma that are visited not only on the individual child, but also the entire society. The thrust of this paper therefore is to appraise the relevance of advocacy journalism in safeguarding the rights of Nigerian child to free and compulsory education. For a relevant theoretical basis, this study is guided by two theories; agenda setting theory and two-step flow/opinion leadership theory.

Agenda Setting Theory

The notion of agenda setting by the media can be traced to Lippman (1922). He suggested that the media were responsible for the "pictures in our heads". Forty years later, Cohen (1963) further fine-tunes the idea when he argued that the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but they are usually successful in telling people what to think about. Lang and Lang (1966) reinforces this notion observing that media force attention to certain issues. (Okalla 2007, p. 31) posits that agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media, the ability to tell us that issues are important, those issues or individuals that the media choose to publicise ultimately become the issues and individuals we think and talk about.

According to the theory, those topics, issues and individuals we think become important because of the media attention they receive. For instance, if the media choose to publicise and highlight the issue of child education in eastern Nigeria, using channels that are conversant with them, then it becomes an important issue to discuss about in Eastern Nigeria. As McLuhan (1968, p. 204) cited in Okalla (2007, p. 31) concludes,

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the press can colour events using them in a particular way or refusing to use them at all. Hence, it has become imperative for the Nigerian mass media to craft and package some persuasive messages and programmes that will be published or aired to influence the stakeholders to consider the education of the child very important.

Two-Step-Flow/Opinion Leadership Theory

This involves messages from the mass media, which get to opinion leaders, who spread information through interpersonal interaction to their followers. Okunna (1999, p. 102) notes that “the first step involves the flow of information from mass media to the opinion leaders while the second step takes place when the information is relayed to the audience by the opinion leaders”. The influence of opinion leaders is very important as it employs face to face interaction. Because they are embodiments of norms and values of their group or social categories, opinion leaders are active in protecting the interests of their groups. Through personal influence, opinion leaders are able to protect group values from any external influences which might attempt to convert group members to adopt values and behavior patterns which are contrary to those of the group. Such influence could come from the mass media. Thus, opinion leaders act as intervening variables between their followers and the mass media and could help to cushion the effects of the mass media on members of their groups. Likewise, opinion leaders can help their followers receive and imbibe new ideas such as free and compulsory education in Nigeria.

Universal, Free and Basic Education for Nigerian Children: An Overview

The child is generally believed to be a gift from God, which must be handled with care. A child like a tendril is very delicate, fragile and must be given a direction. The child needs assistance and special attention to survive (Nwankwo, 2012). One popular aphorism says that children are the leaders of tomorrow. A society that invests in the child, invests in tomorrow, while a society that neglects or treats the child with reckless abandon awaits a bleak future (Ucheatu, 2012).

Education of the child is very crucial to the realisation of the aforementioned aspirations. Education has been variously described as the key to success and the very foundation of good living condition and other accomplishments in life. More importantly, education is power, because it is synonymous with knowledge (Emmanuel, 2012). Education is a light that could illuminate any shade of darkness in one’s life, lighten up the society and leads to advancement and development of all sectors of the economy. The reverse is the case where education is not emphasised, especially at the child’s level.

It is in consideration of the plethora of benefits accruable from education to the society that the need for free and compulsory education of the Nigerian child becomes very imperative. Free and compulsory education in Nigeria is a constitutional issue. It is a right under the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy provided under chapter II of the constitution.

Despite being a non-justiceable right, that is the right is not enforceable in the court, there have been moves to upgrade economic, social and cultural rights to fundamental rights and a submission to this effect was made to the Joint National Assembly and Presidential Committee on the Review of the 1999 Constitution (Iwokwagh, 2012). However, following a suit brought before the West African Community Court of Justice in Abuja by the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), a Nigerian NGO, against the Federal Government on Nov. 30, 2010, the Nigerian Government was ordered to provide free and compulsory education to every Nigerian child. According to Radio Netherland Worldwide (RNW) (2010), this ground-breaking judgment followed the ECOWAS court’s earlier ruling that declared that all Nigerians are entitled to education as a legal and human right.

In the words of Femi Falana, SERAP’s solicitor; “This is the first time an international court has recognised a state obligation to provide legally enforceable human rights to education to its citizens” RNW (2010). It sends a clear message to ECOWAS member states, including Nigeria and indeed all African governments, that the denial of this human right to millions of African citizens will not be tolerated.

The Registered Trustees of the Socio-Economic Rights And Accountability Project (SERAP) against the Federal Government and Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), alleges that there is violation of

the right to quality education, the right to dignity, the right of people to their wealth and natural resources and economic and social development guaranteed by articles 1,2,17,21 and 22 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (Mumuni, 2012).

The ECOWAS court equally ruled that the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) failed to discharge its legal responsibility pursuant to its fundamental instrument to monitor how states are spending and using state' natural wealth and resources in order to ensure that the resources are spent for the purposes for which they are meant.

A report by Obia (2011) had it that failure by many state governments in the country to access their entitlements from the Universal Basic Education Fund is making it increasingly impossible for a growing number of children of school age to access education, in contravention of the UBE Act. Speaking in support of the foregoing, Femi Falana, a Lagos-based lawyer and human right activist, said that many state governments had refused to pay the counterpart funds needed to access funds in UBE Fund, a situation that has affected their ability to deliver free and compulsory education to school age children as required by the UBE Act (www.rnw.nl/africa/article/nigeria-o...). He said if the situation continued, "we shall have no other alternative than to approach the court for mandamus to compel them to comply with the law" (Saharareporters.com/news-page).

Under the UBE Act enacted on May 26, 2004, every government in Nigerian is to provide "free compulsory and universal basic education for every Nigerian child of primary and junior secondary school age". To finance the scheme, the federal government contributes not less than 2 percent of its consolidated revenue fund to UBE Fund to which states are expected to add not less than 50 percent of the total cost of projects to qualify for grants. With many states failing to access the necessary funds to carry out their statutory responsibility of providing free and compulsory education for Nigeria's teeming school age children, leading to a situation where "over 12 million Nigeria children of school age are roaming the streets as beggars, vendors and urchins" (Saharareporters.com/news-page), the Nigerian child's rights have been badly violated.

The UBE Act further stipulates that, any parent who fails to ensure that his child receives full-time education suitable to his age is deemed to have committed an offence and is liable on conviction to fine of #10,000 or imprisonment for a term of three months or both. So far, no parent or guardian has been brought to trial under the law (Allafrica.com/./2010/201202.html).

Worried by this situation, a civil society group, SERAP, had used the Nigerian Government at the ECOWAS court to challenge the failure of the government to implement the free education programme. The court affirmed the right of every Nigerian child to free education in line with the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

Concept of Education

Education is an instrument of power, prestige, survival, greatness and advancement of men and nations. It is also an agent of change, a key to knowledge and accelerates development. Education had also been viewed as a continuous process where individual continues to learn, re-learn norms, values and attitudes to make them fit to the society they live. According to Offorma (2009, p. 2) "education is the process of providing information to an inexperienced person to help him/her develop physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, spiritually, politically and economically. Danladi (2006, p. 1), sees education as a process that will bring about all-round development and progress of individuals and society in general. Education is the process through which individuals are made functional members of their society (Ocho, 2005). It is a process through which the young acquires knowledge and realises her potentialities and uses them for self actualisation, to be useful to himself and others. It is a means of preserving, transmitting and improving the culture of the society. In every society, education connects acquisition of something good, something worthwhile (Offorma, 2009).

The National Policy on Education revised (2004) gave the following as the objectives of education in Nigeria:

- To provide functional literacy and continuing education for adults and youths who had never had the advantage of formal education or who did not complete their primary education (Nomads, Migrants and Physically challenged);
- To provide functional remedial education for those young people who did not complete secondary schools;
- To provide for different categories of people a formal education to improve their knowledge and skills;
- To provide in-service, on-the-job vocational and professional training for different categories of workers and professional in order to improve their basic skills and knowledge;
- To give the adult citizens of the country necessary aesthetics, cultural and civic education for public enlightenment.

No nation can afford to toy with the education of her citizen, especially, the child, who will be the father or mother of tomorrow because education is the bedrock of all facets of development. Children are future leaders of tomorrow and mothers are guardians of the future and the first aim of every family and society should be to raise healthy and productive individuals who are physically, psychologically, socially and mentally well developed. These can be achieved through the education of the child who is the leader of tomorrow. In the northern Nigeria, the challenge of child education is still enormous. Abdul (2011, p. 1) notes that although Nigeria has had a national policy on education since 1981, it has not been implemented effectively and effectively in northern Nigeria.

Rights to Education

Education is one of the fundamental rights of individuals. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December, 1949 stipulated that:

- Everyone has right to education. This shall be free at least in the elementary and primary stages.
- Elementary education shall be compulsory while technical and professional education shall be made generally available.
- Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children (Nwangwu, 1976) cited in (Offorma 2009, p. 2).

The provision of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) on education is enshrined in section 18(1) that: "Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels". It also stated that government shall eradicate illiteracy and to this end, government shall as and when practicable, provide free compulsory and universal primary education, free secondary education, free university education and free adult literacy education and that no one shall be discriminated on the basis of sex race religion, etc.

The United Nation Economic Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) declaration in Dakar 2002 also stipulated that:

- i. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- ii. Ensuring that by the year 2015, all children with special emphasis on girl-child in difficult circumstances and from ethnic minorities have access to and complete free and compulsory qualitative education.
- iii. Ensuring that learning needs of all young people and adult are met through equitable needs to appropriate learning and life skilled programmes.
- iv. Achieving 5% improvement in level of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women and equitable access at basic continuing education.
- v. Eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by the year 2015.
- vi. Improving all aspects of quality education and ensuring excellence for all, so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved in life skills.

Advocacy Journalism in Perspective

According to the International Encyclopedia of Communication (2008) advocacy journalism is a term that describes the use of journalism techniques to promote a specific political or social cause. For sociosphere.com (2012), advocacy journalism is an evidence-based reporting with a stand point. Advocacy journalism has also been described as a genre of journalism that intentionally and transparently adopts a non-objective viewpoint, usually for some social or political purpose. Because it is intended to be factual, it is distinguished from propaganda. It is also distinct from instances of media biases and failures of objectivity in media outlets, which attempts to be or which present themselves as objective or neutral.

Kirkman (2011) while delivery a remark at the Advocacy Journalism in the Digital Age Conference 2011 held at the America University School of Communication and the Ford Foundation said that when media barrage us with fearsome and unintelligible images of catastrophe, making audiences feel helpless and hopeless, advocacy journalism can provide the context and analysis and evidence and testimony that frame and drive public debate. Kirkman (2011) further remarks that the job of advocacy journalists is to make people interested in what is in their interest. Free Merriam Webster Dictionary on Facebook refers to advocacy journalism as the journalism that advocates a course or expresses view point (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/...). It is also seen as journalism in which the writer or the publication expresses a subjective view or promotes a certain cause (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2009).

The Handbook for Citizen Journalists defines advocacy journalism as a genre of journalism that adopts a viewpoint for the sake of advocating on behalf of a social, political, business or religious purpose. It is journalism with an intentional and transparent bias. Chronik (2011) provides some warning to writers and readers regarding advocacy journalism:

“There can be negative consequences to advocacy journalism, like any form of journalism, when it is not done responsibly...Becoming involved with a cause blurs the lines of a journalist’s duties and responsibilities. The public might have a difficult time accepting and trusting that journalists are both promoters and truth-tellers. And there are many ways a journalist can abuse his or her power if he or she feels the ends justify the means.”

Advocacy journalism tends to persuade, through fact-telling. It rejects the notion of objectivity, instead, exposing bias to the reader and expressing explicit opinions on the subject matter. The general goal is to present facts in such a compelling, well researched manner that even a skeptical reader or one who does not share the writer’s opinions will be swayed to some degree, or at least better informed about the issue at hand.

A synthesis of these different perspectives of advocacy journalism would enable us to have more vivid and broad-based definition of what advocacy journalism entails. Among other things, it will furnish us with the defining characteristics with which we may attempt our definition of advocacy journalism. First, it applies journalism techniques. Second, it is evidence-based reporting. Third, it had a standpoint. Fourth, it promotes a specific cause.

Based on this backdrop, we may define advocacy journalism as an evidence-based genre of journalism, which identifies social issues, takes a stand on the identified issues and which promotes these issues with the objective of shaping public perception and building up social understanding. The foregoing is in tandem with the position of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), where they state that the media (journalists) have worked hard at discovering the truth and mobilising the society towards worthy causes by presenting evidence and opinion as the basis for decision. Considering Siebert et al’s perspective of journalism, will no doubt show a blend of two perspectives of advocacy journalism which we have looked at in our definition of the concept.

It is therefore logical to encapsulate here that advocacy journalism aims at discovering the truth and mobilising the society towards worthy causes by presenting evidence and opinion as the basis for making decision. Advocacy journalism is practiced by a broad range of mainstream media outlets and alternative media and special interest publications and programmes. It might also apply to a single article in an otherwise neutral publication such as political stories in “Rolling Stone”; there are also “advocacy journals”,

or “alternative publication”, which are marketed to target groups based on their interests or biases (Sociosphere.com 2012).

Discussion

Journalism, in all its ramifications is a weapon of change. It goes without saying that journalists are critical elements to the survival and continuous sustenance of modern societies. This also makes them true watchdog of the society. As watchdogs, onus is on them to safeguard the society from unwanted intrusions just the same way watchdogs keep away unwanted people from the residences of their masters (Iwokwagh 2012). By barking and exposing strange and suspicious movements, watchdogs alert their owners of impending danger; raise their consciousness and heighten their surveillance mechanism. In the same vein, journalists are expected to alert the societies in which they function of impending dangers by pointing to violations and anomalies in the social order (Iwokwagh, 2012).

Through the application of status conferral, agenda setting and gate keeping functions, journalists shape public discourse and events (Wrights, 1960; Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wine 2006). Journalists have greater responsibilities of maintaining social order, even above the capacity of the government. Expounding the foregoing, Jefferson avers “...were it left for me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the later” (U.S. Department of State International Information Programmes 2012 p.1). This underscores the strategic importance of journalists to the smooth functioning and development of society. It goes also to explain why the media institution is acclaimed globally to be the fourth pillar of society.

The future of Nigerian child will in part, depend on the extent and quality of efforts put in addressing the issues that affect children (Oyeno, 1995, P.7 cited in Nwankwo 2011). The media need to remind relevant bodies, authorities and individuals about the obligation of the state and adults to protect the individual child and create conditions in which all children can develop their potential (Arnold 2012, P.1).

Any society that seeks a credible future must of necessity guarantee social reproduction by investing in the preservation and training of the younger generation. This is a critical aspect of the journalists’ responsibility. Journalists are also saddled with the responsibility of adding meaning and contexts to facts to make them relevant to the people.

According to the U.S. Department of State International Information Programmes (2012, P.1) “... society has grown increasingly complex, people rely more and more on newspapers, radio, magazines and television to keep abreast with world news, opinion, political ideas”. It goes without saying that journalists have as part of their social responsibility, the Herculean task of interpreting the increasingly growing complex societal issues to the understanding of the average mind, as citizens are increasingly relying on the media in general and journalists in particular to make meaning in the increasingly complex society in which they now live (Iwokwagh, 2012). Be that as it may, the imperative for advocacy journalism, particularly as it concerns free and compulsory education for the Nigerian child cannot be denied. Advocacy journalism simply refers to issue cum evidence based reporting. It is journalism that advocates a course or expresses a view point. It has three basic platforms within the context of this paper. The first platform deals with creating awareness of the non-compliance with the right of the Nigerian child to free and compulsory education. The second deals with persuading parents/guardians, relevant policy institutions, governments at all levels to respect and uphold the rights of the Nigerian child to free and compulsory education. The third deals with issues of mobilising the society at large on the need to seek redress when these rights are violated on the one hand and the need to fearlessly apply sanctions on culprits as a corrective measure on the other hand.

Conclusion

Advocacy journalism promises the promotion of political and social causes through journalism techniques. The rights of Nigerian child to free and compulsory education in Nigeria has been showcased in this paper highlighting the various steps NGOs and the media should take as part of their obligation to sensitize the society and pressure the government to shoulder its responsibility and implement policies that could engender the expected change in the society.

Consequently, Nigerian journalists have been challenged to through advocacy journalism suggest policy alternatives which may either constitute the framework or add impetus to the drive for change. If we are ever to create meaningful change advocacy journalism will be the single most crucial element to enable the necessary organizing. It is therefore very important that we learn how to be successful advocacy journalists, though for many, this will require a different way of identifying and pursuing goals.

Those state governments that gave deaf ears to the call for implementation of the UBE act of failing to contribute their counterpart fund should be pressured through advocacy to sit up. There's need also to let every stakeholder know that Nigerian child's right to free and compulsory education must be given due attention. Every agency saddled with the task of making sure Nigerian children attain their rights to free, basic and compulsory education should stop dilly-dallying on the implementation. There is also need for collaboration between civil society groups and Nigerian journalists in pursuing a common course for the good of the citizens.

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