

FRIENDSHIP AT THE BEAT AND THE QUEST FOR OBJECTIVITY IN REPORTING: THE CASE OF THE RIVERS STATE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY (BEAT)

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Abstract

News is about people, the people who make the things happen and the people whose lives are affected by what happens. Beat reporters have the advantage of getting to know the people on their beats and therefore able to tell the story in details, which affords the reporter an opportunity to become an expert in that field. Thus, the first duty of the beat reporter is to the public and not the contact, hence, the call for objectivity in his reportage. This paper examined how friendship at the beat can affect objectivity in reportage, using the Rivers State House of Assembly beat as the focus of the study. The in-depth interview and observation research designs were adopted while population was the 25 accredited members of the Rivers State House of Assembly. The work is anchored on the Absolutist Theory propounded by Emmanuel Kant. Findings of the paper show that friendship at the beat affects objectivity and that reporters remain at a particular beat for a long time without being changed. It concluded that familiarity with beats and friendship is inimical to effective practice of journalism as reporters tend to dance to the whims and caprices of their pay masters, thereby dampening their reports, while it recommended among others that beats should be rotational to de-familiarize a reporter with a particular beat.

Keywords: Objectivity; Beat; Legislature (RSHA); Absolutist Theory

Introduction

One of the advantages of having reporters assigned to a beat is to make them become more knowledgeable in the field. Beat reporting in Nigeria, according to Adeniyi and Suleiman (2017, p.1), grew from the early 1980's onto the 90's and onwards. They further stated that it was out of an attempt to perfect news reporting, by encouraging specialization amongst reporters that it started. Reporters would need to take every opportunity to become knowledgeable and better educated about their beats as they need to read books and magazines on the subject, attend conferences, to enable them understand the beat, and report it better. To report effectively, specialization is required in beats. Thus, according to Obe (as cited in Adeniyi & Suleiman, 2017), "Specialised Reporting" simply means reporting from

special areas or fields. They maintained that it is a clear departure from the general type of reporting that is not focused on particular fields or areas. It is therefore referred to as reporting specialties. Adeniyi & Suleimam, (2017), posit that specialization is not unique to journalism alone. Other professions like law and medicine also have their areas of specialization. For law, some lawyers specialize in maritime law, company and allied matters, criminal law, civil law, jurisprudence, etc.

The news beat shoulders an enormous responsibility on the journalists. This is as it concerns the watchdog, agenda setting and social responsibility function of the press. According to Akabogu (2005) the Journalist as a member of the society is expected to maintain some ethical codes of conduct as he discharges his duty or responsibility of informing the members of the public objectively and accurately. He noted with dismay that some Journalists have thrown these ethical standards to the dogs. Buttressing this fact, Ashong (2017, p. 1) states that it is trite that every journalism course of study or code of practice accords objectivity in reporting pride of place. Whether it be under the communist press or the libertarian (free) press system which represent the two extremes of the continuum of control, there is usually a commitment to certain of “objectivity”.

Beat reporting is more like division of labour. Responsibility is shared between reporters for efficiency, increased productivity, and better enterprise promotion. It helps quick execution of assignments and enhances acquaintance ability. The beat system has numerous advantages that can also become counterproductive if not properly managed and can then be dangerous. According to Saxena (2013), the three dangers of a beat system are;

- **Complacency:** A major danger of beat reporting is that a reporter may become too complacent. He knows where to get his information, and when. The excitement and challenge of cultivating sources and digging up information dies down after the first few months. A reporter starts taking things for granted.
- **Excessive familiarisation:** Another disadvantage of beat reporting is that the reporter may come too close to a source, and may avoid doing stories that may hurt the source.
- **Source becomes the control:** Sometimes, the source starts taking advantage of their relationship with the reporter, and might not give him the desired information needed to do his job.

Assembly reporters can be told things in confidence by lawmakers who are politicians, sometimes this can be a subtle attempt to exert control over them. At other times politicians may try to exert very obvious control over journalists, by buying them gifts or giving them other favours. Therefore, instead of telling the news objectively in terms of who make the news and the people affected by it, the beat reporter may begin to tell the news only in terms of the people who make it, (Ene, 2019).

Thus, this paper assesses the effect of friendship at the beat on news objectivity in the media, with particular reference to the Rivers State House of Assembly beat.

Statement of problem

Modern day journalism practice tends to negate the ground norms of journalism practice which is objectivity by fraternizing at the beats. Friendship at the beats often leads to lack of

objectivity which is the problem that this study concerns itself with.

Receiving of payments in form of stipends, white envelope and gifts will lead to playing to the gallery by satisfying the dictates of the pay masters and rendering objectivity to a nullity. The retention of a reporter on a particular beat for ages, breeds familiarity and friendship, thus, making it difficult for a reporter to independently report objectively without biases.

Happenings within the Assembly gallery, need to be objectively reported, but with gratifications it becomes a problem. The question therefore is, can familiarity with the source, affect objectivity in reporting the beat, especially as it affects the Rivers State House of Assembly?

Research Questions

1. Does friendship at the beat influence reporters of the Rivers State House of Assembly from being objectives?
2. Does friendship by media owner, managers and editors affect objectivity in news stories emanating from the Rivers State House of Assembly?
3. What are the challenges facing reporters from accessing news from the State House of Assembly beat?

The concept of Beat Reporting

Beat reporting, also known as specialized reporting, is a genre of journalism that can be described as the craft of in-depth reporting on a particular issue, sector, organization or institution over time (Wikipedia 2019). A beat reporter is someone who is specialized in covering a particular segment of the population or a select geographic area, neighbourhood or business sector. Alao and Olawunmi (2014, p. 44) posit that beat reporting is a system of segmenting into specific areas of coverage where reporters are deployed over an extended period of time for them to gain better understanding of such deployment with a view to facilitating a more informed reporting. Abrahamsen (2017) sees beat reporting giving journalists the opportunity to focus on one area.

According to him beat reporters develop in-depth knowledge, know experts related to their beat and create a thorough contact list of people to help them tell compelling and credible stories. This Journalist will cover a district locale that defines his or her beat, such as the crimes courts or the police, education or perhaps the schools, religion or the Church, sports, business happenings in local or State government, medicine or healthcare, the environment or science, the beat reporter is much more than someone that delivers news associated with the day's events in local politics or the criminal justice system. Beat reporters build up a base of knowledge on and gain familiarity with the topic, allowing them to provide insight and commentary in addition to reporting straight facts. According to Alao & Olawunmi (2014, p. 33) beat reporting is aimed at creating a pool of well-informed journalists who will be able to intelligently report on the growing complexities of relations among peoples, businesses, governments and nations by reporters to specific areas of news coverage for an extended period of time for them to gain deeper knowledge of those areas.

Generally, beat reporters will also build up a rapport with sources that they visit again and again, allowing for trust to build between the journalist and his/her source of

information. This distinguishes them from other journalists who might cover similar stories from time to time. Journalists become invested in the beats they are reporting for, and become passionate about mastering that beat. Beat reporters often deal with the same sources day after day, and must return to those sources regardless of their relationship with them. Those sources may or may not be pleased with the reporting of the reporters. It is pertinent that beat reporters contact their sources quickly, obtain all necessary information, and write on deadline.

Beat reporters collect information from each person they meet while reporting. They routinely call, visit, and e-mail sources to obtain any new information for articles. When reporters have experience on a specific beat, they are able to gain both knowledge and sources to lead them to new stories relating to that beat. Beats are able to help reporters define their roles as journalists, and also avoid overlap of stories within the newsroom (www.nraismc.com, 2018).

The role of the beat reporter is also to interpret, translate into a comprehensible story. Much like the legal profession has its own proprietary language, so too do many regions, neighbourhood, sectors and specialized businesses. It is the role of the beat reporter to understand the language and convert it for general consumption for the reader. They further explained that there are traditional beats which include the national assembly and the state houses of assembly, the state house and government houses, politics, energy, maritime, aviation, the capital market, the courts, religion, and education.

Objectivity in Reporting

Journalism objectivity or news objectivity had its origins in Western media cultures, especially in the United States, in the early 20th century. The principle, however, has found its way into codes of ethics and journalism education in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Ward, 2019). He stated that, in 2018, objectivity is a controversial norm. Within the field of journalism ethics, the issue is whether objectivity as traditionally understood—a neutral reporting of “just the facts”—remains a valid ideal. In society, the debate swirls around the future of democratic public spheres and the need for reliable news sources. Misinformation and partisan voices threaten to swamp public channels of information. How can citizens distinguish truth from falsity in journalism? Objective from subjective reports? Informed analysis from biased opinion?

According to Hackett (2015) the concept of objectivity connotes a set of practices and ideas, such as a stance of neutrality or balance in relation to the people and events being reported. The prehistory of objectivity is, in large part, the history of objectivity, truth, and fact in the culture. This is because journalists defined their notion of objectivity by adapting notions from philosophy, science, and the ambient culture. For a reporter, it's not hard to find things to write about when a big news story is breaking. But what about those slow news days when there are no fires, homicides or press conferences to cover? Those are the days when reporters must dig up stories on their own, stories not based on press releases but on a reporter's own observation and investigation, (Rogers 2019, p.1).

The central notion of news objectivity is that reporters should be neutral stenographers of fact, eliminating their opinions and interpretations from their reports. By the middle of the 1900s onward, this idea of objectivity as just the facts was subjected to a withering critique by journalists who sought a more engaged journalism and academics who rejected the idea of neutral facts. Also, the early 21st-century digital revolution created online communication

that favored an interpretive journalism skeptical of neutrality and objectivity.

The Legislature.

The Legislature according to Aloa & Olawunmi (2014, p. 124) is a generic name which is domesticated under various labels in any countries – National and State Assemblies in Nigeria, Parliament in Britain and Congress in the United States, among others. They further noted that in a democracy, the Legislature, the law making arm of government, can be regarded as the ultimate state authority given its two fundamental roles. These are the powers to override a President's objection to a bill and still get the bill passed into law once the legislature can muster a two-thirds vote in favour of such bill and the power to impeach the President for contraventions which the Lawmakers consider impeachable offence(s). "In this way, we can say 'Parliament' means the place where deliberations are held. Combining the two views, we can say Legislature or Parliament is that branch of government which performs the function of lawmaking through deliberations" (Ghai, 2015). Therefore, in reporting the Legislature such as the Rivers State House of Assembly, it is important to be conversant with the hierarchy that is the leadership structure in the chamber, the proceedings as well as the oversight functions under which house committees are set up to oversee the activities of relevant ministries, parastatals and relevant agencies of government. Hence the responsibility of the beat reporter who would have lasted some time at the legislature to understand legislative lingo and with the ability to explain them to the public.

But the danger of this according to Open School of Journalism (2013) is that it is hard to spend so much time getting to know people without starting to feel like one of them. The danger is that the beat reporter forgets that he/she is an observer of the beat, looking after the interests of the reader or listener and starts looking after the interests of the key people in the beat. Potter (as cited in Uzochukwu, 2014) laments:

Ethical lapses do occur in journalism. Reporters have accepted payments from sources. News organizations have published advertisements in the guise of news. When this happens, the publics have the right to question everything that appears in the news media. All journalists and all news organizations, suffer when journalists behave unethically because that behaviour calls the profession's credibility into question. When credibility suffers, so does a news organization ability to survive economically.

Also Wilmot (as cited in Uzochukwu 2014) in his comparative analysis on the consequence of unethical behaviour among journalists maintains:

You have a choice; you can work in a supermarket, a bank, or a surgery. As long as you choose to do a job where truth is the measure of Professionalism, you must resist whatsoever the sacrifice. You cannot offer the excuse that you tell lies to feed and house your family because by lying to defend a disastrous government you sacrifice the futures of your children and grandchildren. Doctors, architects, builders and other professionals have codes of conduct as well as professional competence, violation of which leads to deaths and collapse of buildings. Doctors, lawyers and engineers can be sued or jailed for professional malpractice (p. 25 – 26).

Beat and the quest for Objectivity in reporting

The constitutional and legal protections for a free press as well as access to government-held information give journalists not only the right, but also the tools with which to monitor government. The checks and balances inherent in the representative system also legitimize journalistic inquiry as part of a broader framework of government accountability to citizens. According to Nwanne (2007, p.444) “perhaps one of the strongest arguments against objectivity is rooted in what Lichtenberg refers to as the “sociology of knowledge”. He further explains that this sociology finds its fullest expression in postmodernism; it is shared by many sociologists, humanists, legal scholars and other social critics. They believe that the idea of objectivity rests on an outmoded and untenable theory of knowledge, according to which objective knowledge consists in correspondence between some idea or statement and a reality out there in the world.

Media freedoms are not guaranteed and journalists, especially those in the beats can count on few protections. Apart from physical attacks, beat reporters have also been subjected to jail terms and harassment lawsuits as well as laws that restrict information access, all of which impede their ability to expose wrongdoing. Beat system of reporting is expensive and time-consuming. It requires an investment in the journalist and resources to make him bold. Udejah (2004) insists that the media cannot be considered separately from political system in which they operate because political forces of the society direct and constrain the choices of those who operate and administer media services. He further acknowledged that not every political culture encourages the media to set their own public agenda. For instance, in a multi-cultural context, politicians and bureaucrats often reserve for themselves the power to set agenda, although they use broadcast media and other institutions as deemed appropriate to each situation.

This researchers corroborates with the fact that some prominent people in society influence the media by telling them what they want them to go public with, for instance a Lawmaker in the Rivers State House of Assembly Hon. Kelechi Nwogu in July 2014 made a statement against the then administration of Governor Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, when he realized himself, he called back members of the Rivers State House of Assembly Press Corp who were present at the instance and asked them delete part of what he has said which to the media is main meat of the news. In another instance, when the power players in the society wants their opinion to be heard, they go to straight to any media of their choice not minding what the beat reporters think. Perilla (2018) posits that objectivity is not being a mouthpiece for rich and powerful interests, neither is it just promoting their personal politics but to criticize and report on those things that are clearly affecting the lives of people in their communities.

Objectivity in reporting entails the responsibility for Journalists as fourth estate of the realm, besides the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. This requires that Journalists wherever they found themselves should not take sides in their reportage. Objectivity according to Calcutt & Hammond (2011) is a complex and dynamic idea that refers to three distinct, yet interrelated concepts, truthfulness, neutrality and detachment.

Consequences of objectivity failure in Beats

The failure of many journalists to abide by the professional code of ethics which emphasises objectivity, balance, fairness, thoroughness, honesty and relevance have led to the

perception that many of our journalists through their coverage of Legislative activities often de-emphasize how to make a contribution towards the information that would bring about sustainable development. Instead they raise issues that will please their pay masters (Pate & Dauda 2015).

Though, the above problems may not all be deliberate, but a manifestation of mental laziness, professional incompetence, poor research and analytical skills and very disturbingly, arrogance among some media personnel. Journalists reporting biased information or not accurate sometimes maybe counterproductive because to pretend or look away from important information that could benefit the public rather than the legislature will be dangerous. Instead it could be reported accurately with diplomacy. "Nothing has a greater capacity to undermine the moral and ethical credibility of a writer of the media than evidence of distorted reporting of factual events. This is because in journalism what is omitted is sometimes of greater value than what is reported" (Sankore as cited in Pate & Dauda 2015, p. 221).

Meanwhile, looking further into the challenges of Nigerian journalists, it is discovered that some of them work in very stringent conditions. They are handicapped with poor living conditions, inadequate facilities, poor remuneration, and absence of proper working tools and lack of security or insurance scheme etc. based on this they are left in the hands of incompetent sources of information. Those in the Rivers State House of Assembly for instance are left in the hands of the Lawmakers who by providing some of the facilities buy their consciences.

Similarly, some of the journalists who appear competent are subdued by the attitudes of their individual media organizations to the detriment of their professionalism. This is because some of the media managers, editor or the owners are so familiar with the leadership of the institutions in Nigeria that when a story concerning them comes to their desk, they are killed instantly not minding the effort of the journalist that brought the story. For instance the government owned media in the State will never air anything negative about any lawmaker in the Rivers State House of Assembly. The private owned media on their own part finds it difficult to publish because of their familiarity with the lawmakers who solves their financial needs. The survival instinct pervading most media organizations, in their desire to sell copies and attract viewers and listeners, they violate journalistic ethics through "colourful, unique and unexpected" stories which may have negative consequence on society, (Pate & Dauda, 2015, p. 221). Based on this fact, Ekeanyanwu (2007) advised that media editors and owners are expected to avoid the practices of fraternization with political aspirations of their owners. According to him they are expected to shun all forms of subjective or bias reporting to political events and issues. He however concluded that Nigeria Journalists has allowed their employers, families, relatives and friends as well as type/nature of society to influence the way and manner they carry on with their professional duties.

It is also common knowledge that most journalists are afraid of being recalled back to the office because of the stipend gotten at the end of the month while media owners and editors seek financial help from these lawmakers at the detriment of objectivity. Most media owners are politicians directly in government or outside the government, but with active support for the government with various motivations for the support, (Akpan & Nwosu, 2015, p. 269). For instance, Mr. Ngo Martin Yellow was the Chairman Civil Service Commission in Rivers State and owns the "Top News" newspaper which also has a correspondent in the Rivers State House of Assembly. The paper created a full page column

for the activities of the Assembly.

Tinubu (as cited in Akpan & Nwosu, 2015) noted:

While a section of the media has performed creditably well, a growing section is besotted with power, often crossing the line. The newsrooms have become shopping centres where interests shop for the most pliable editor or reporter to push their points of view or story. The investigative knack gone. The fire of patriotism continues to be extinguished and that of professionalism is now only a flicker. Journalism has become not just a danger to itself as a profession, but inflicts harm to the Republic by knowingly feeding the people half-truths, innuendos and outright falsehood. When reporting and reality are too far apart, journalism has ceased and propaganda has begun. A nation awash in propaganda is a nation dry and devoid of democracy much like a desert is devoid of water. (p. 269).

Theoretical Framework

This Paper adopted the absolutist theory as its tool of analysis. This theory argues that there are moral universal which should guide all human beings no matter the place, time or age. It is also based on the fact that a good action should be right everywhere in the World, at all times and in all circumstances. Kant (as cited in Marbaniang, 2012) assumed that reason imposes moral obligation and that reason reveals that morality is a matter of moral duty rather than consequences, since circumstances sometimes prevent “us from performing our moral duty. It is the view of Merrill (as cited in Pepple and Acholonu 2018, p. 58) that the ethical absolutist believes that there is one universal and eternal code that basically applies to everyone in all ages, that changing opinions, traditions and conditions make no significant differences in this absolute moral code.

Fab-Ukozor (2004, P. 15) states that in the field of journalism, the professional who believes in this theory accepts in principle that there are absolute and universal journalistic ethics which should guide the practicing journalists everywhere in the World and which should equally form the basis for the articulation of a universal and eternal code in journalism. The ethical moral universals are truthfulness, fairplay, accuracy, balance and objectivity. Therefore, for a Journalist, especially beat reporter or Media Organization to maintain its integrity, objectivity in news must be maintained.

Methodology

This paper adopted the in-depth interview (IDI) technique alongside participant observation as research designs. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p.139), IDI “is a qualitative method which provides detailed background information about respondents and elaborate on data concerning respondents' opinions, values, motivation, reconciliations, experiences and feelings”. Therefore, the In-depth Interview technique was used for the study in order to get information from those directly involved in the issue.

The population of this study comprised all accredited members of the Rivers State House of Assembly beat who were selected because of the focus of the study. A total number of journalists in the Rivers State House of Assembly beat as at January 2020 is twenty-five (25). Therefore, the population of the study is 25 accredited members of the Rivers State House of Assembly Press Corp. This implies that the 25 accredited Journalists in the Rivers State House of Assembly beat were all sampled. This is known as census survey, where the

entire population is sampled because of the small population size. According to Nworgu (2008) when the population of study is small, the entire population can be sampled.

The Participant Observation is the second method used in this study. It is an added advantage when a researcher undergoes participant-observation because the researcher has to be there to observe what is actually happening Lindlof and Taylor(as cited in Acholonu, 2019). They explained that qualitative observation is primarily done in naturalistic settings in which the researcher observe her/his subjects performing and interacting in a natural environment. They highlighted that qualitative observers have the advantage of observing without being governed by specific procedures. Researchers conducting qualitative participant-observation note broader trends, styles, and patterns correlated with the way their subjects behave.

Qualitative Data Presentation of the In-depth Interview.

The analysis of data was presented qualitatively. This section presents an analyses and explanation of the qualitative information collected during the interview with the various respondents in the Rivers State House of Assembly beat. An explanation does not exist in and of itself, it explains something. The formulation of the question identifies the interest of the researchers, the aspects of the case they are concerned with and the direction of the research. It also suggests what would provide a satisfactory explanation, Andrade (as cited in Acholonu, 2019, p. 159).

In the analyses done in this section, the researchers tried to make sense out of the responses of the respondents. This entail searching for similar patterns of thinking that is within the bounds of the questions asked. In the qualitative analysis of the various responses made by the participants during the interview session, the researchers used a constant comparison method which involved the probing for common words, phrases and concepts in the discussions and responses of the participants.

Secondly, the participant's responses were then contrasted and categorized carefully in line with the various themes identified and highlighted in the research objectives. This entails highlighting the key responses that agreed with the research objectives of the study, in such a way as to enable the researchers to sift through the responses and take away irrelevant portions and analyse the portions highlighted. , while focusing on the critical issues that has bearing on the research objective.

The 25 respondents were interviewed properly with an average of 5 minutes for each person. Due to length of the interview, a summary of the responses were presented with few facts introduced in indented form. The responses were presented according to how they answered the research questions raised in the study.

Research Question One: Does friendship at the beat affect objectivity in reporting the Rivers State House of Assembly beat?

Most of the respondents at the Rivers State House of Assembly beat agreed that friendship at the beat affects the way the way the reporters write their stories. Some of the respondents evaluated whether familiarity with lawmakers at the Rivers StateHouse of Assembly affect their reportage.

They said it does sometimes as they tend to dance to the whims and caprices of the lawmakers who sometimes pay them for their coverage. They also said overtime, it is almost

as though, they are a family with the lawmakers as they are involved in activities of their personal lives, apart from official duties, hence the friendship created therefrom. Reporter from Rhythm 93.7 FM explained that, “covering a beat almost every other day makes you familiar with the beat and sometimes subjects you to their dictates”.

In discussing the what extent friendship at the beat deprive beat reporters of the Rivers State House of Assembly of objectivity role? One of the respondent attested to the fact that familiarity/friendship at the beat makes one to be less objective in reporting issues that concerns the lawmakers, thereby affect their objectivity role of the media.

Sometimes when we remember that we are always here with the lawmakers, it becomes difficult to report negative things against them” Wave Fm reporter.

The truth is that there are a lot of things they do here that we don't report, sometimes not really about friendship but because you will be afraid that when you report they will threaten to de-accredit your station. Classic FM reporter.

The other respondents supported the views above on how familiarity with lawmakers affect objectivity role of the media. A respondent particularly made reference to the fact that they do not have much of an option. According to the respondents.

...it is a case of he who pays the piper dictates the tune, as you can see it will not be easy to be truly objective, we must report to suit them because we will like them to be angry with us

Some other respondents who did not differ from other ones agreed that friendship at the beat affects the way the reporters write their stories.

the familiarity of some of our reporters with lawmakers here in the Rivers State House of Assembly makes it difficult to report them in negative light. Infact, there a lot of ills in the legislature that are left unreported for fear of being singled out or punished”. “It may be that some of the lawmakers have in one way or the other rendered favour to the some of the reporters which can prevent them from being objective in their reportage.

Research Question 2: Whether friendship by media owners, managers and editors affect objectivity in news from the Rivers State House of Assembly beat?

In discussing whether friendship by media owners, manager and editors affect objectivity in news from the Rivers State House of Assembly beat, the respondents contends that the media owners, managers and editors affect objectivity in news stories as brought by the beat reporters in the Rivers State House of Assembly. They stressed as follows:

“...these media owners do not allow to do our job as required, they are always patronizing one lawmaker or the other, especially if they from the same constituent”

“infact, these media owners are part of our problem, because they are friends with these lawmakers, they see them as untouchables.

The other respondents echoed the thoughts above on the influence of the media owners, managers and editors on objectivity of their reportage. A respondent from Radio Rivers

99.1FM particularly made reference to the fact that the news editor and General manager makes sure that no negative thing is written about the government, as according to them “lawmakers are part of government” these news stories are screened before they go on air. According to the respondent “the influence of media owners weakens the ability of reporters to be objective for fear of being termed as 'insubordination'”. Some respondents, particularly those in the private media in their answers indicated that the media owners, managers and editors influences to a lesser extent the objectivity of the stories brought in by beat reporters. They stated thus: “the influence of the media owners will not have any significant impact at all on the objectivity of news stories because they do not know what we do here, except they are been told”. “Of course, you know that some of these media owners are politicians themselves, they know where they meet, you cannot tell me that somebody like the owner of National Network Newspaper will be objective, when he actually works with a politician”. “The General Managers of the State Broadcast stations are afraid of being removed from office, so cannot be objective, so they must be sure a reporter writes in favour of the lawmakers”

Research Question 3. The challenges facing reporters in accessing news from the Rivers State House of Assembly beat?

The reinvents highlighted some challenges facing reporters in accessing news from the Rivers State House of Assembly beat. The views expressed by the respondents on the challenges ranges from poor remuneration, ignorance, ownership influences, poor working conditions, inadequate facilities. The views are presented as: “presently, at the Rivers State House of Assembly, the recording room is out of place, and speakers are not working, making it difficult for especially the electronic to operate. the electronic media such as the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation, Cool/Wazobia/Info, Rhythm and Love FM etc need voice inserts for actuality reports”. “The correspondents of these media organizations would be moving from one office to the other to record the voices of Lawmakers who spoke at plenary. this is one situation that no organization should allow, they anomaly should be corrected without delay”. “The stipends that are given to reporters as transport allowance is no longer regular even after being slashed”. “Most lawmakers are press shy, so it is becoming difficult to access information from them. Some of the respondents contends that “unprofessional attitude of some reporters also makes it difficult for reporters to access information from lawmakers. “Some lawmakers run away at the sight of a reporter believing they are coming to beg for money” this is because some of us are uncultured, believing they have come here to make money instead of facing their work” “my dear if you see where some of our reporters are rushing money, you begin to wonder”

Data from Participant-Observation

The observations were noted and written down on sheets of papers describing how the members of the Rivers State House of Assembly Press Corps were talking and communicating with each other or to lawmakers. The observer focused on the interactions of Press corps members and the notable incidents, behaviours, actions, stories, and events that are associated with their activities and interaction with lawmakers at the Rivers State House of Assembly.

The type of stories they write, the comments they make and their interactions were observed. To provide data showing how members of the Rivers State House of Assembly beat go about their activities of reportage, one of the researchers was part of the beat to enable her get access to the activities and also interact with them. the researcher attended plenaries, oversight functions, public hearings, wrote stories and made comments.

The report's findings show that friendship at the beat affects objectivity in reporting the Rivers State House of Assembly beat. The beat reporters stated that some of them have stayed so long in the beat that it becomes difficult to report objectively, rather they are choosy in their reportage. For example, Ngozi Anosike, a reporter with National Network Newspaper who has spent over 10 years reporting the Assembly, attends the same with church with the lawmaker representing Asari-Toru 2 constituency. AllwellEne of the Classic FM became very close to the Deputy Speaker that he call him "my Oga". AllwellEne became so close to the lawmaker that he coordinates other reporters when, the Deputy Speaker has other events outside the plenary.

The current study's findings show that media owners, managers and editors, influence affects objectivity in reporting the Rivers State House of Assembly beat. For instance, in trying to inform members of the public on the effort of the Rivers State House of Assembly in the fight against covid 19, the chairman House Committee on Information and training, Hon. EnemiAlabo George, invited the Managers and News editors for a briefing and specific instruction were issued to them, this is despite the fact that there is press corps. In some other instances, the lawmakers send stories directly to the General Managers and News editors not minding the fact every media organization has a representative in the press corps. Kelvin Nengia and Ijeoma Tubosia who both work with owned media noted that sometimes before a story by the House Committee Chairman on information and training gets to them, their GMs have already received them via WhatsApp. This is because they see him as their boss, due to the fact that the state parastatals are under his office.

Announcements for screaming and public hearings from the House of Assembly are most times sent directly to the bosses as a means of familiarization, ignoring the fact that it should come from the reporters. It was observed that before now every announcement that will emanate from the Assembly passes through the reporter. According to IjeomaTubosia, during the 7th Assembly in Rivers State, every announcement goes through reporters and not the other way round. Even when lawmakers call the bosses they are told that there is a representative of the organization there, "but now it's no longer like that".

The findings of the study also revealed that beat reporters face a lot of challenges at the Rivers State House of Assembly such as poor remuneration, victor James, a reporter with Beacon Newspapers and Wariso Wariso of Independent Monitor have been at the Rivers State House of Assembly for over 9 years. They use to five hundred (500,000) thousand naira as allowance for the Press Corps but has been reduced to three hundred (300,000) thousand naira and recently slashed to two hundred (200,000) thousand naira. This is difficult because most of the reporters are not being paid in their various organizations, especially those in private outfits. Hence, it is difficult to be objective since they are looking up to the lawmakers for some gratifications.

The facilities at the Assembly, especially the speakers at the Press gallery are old and begging for repairs. Most of the reporters who need voice inserts go from lawmaker to lawmaker for a repeat of what they said at the plenary. Most the reporters manage the old speaker that is hung at the top of the gallery by raising their midgets although the Assembly

sitting.

Findings also revealed that most lawmakers are afraid of reporters for fear of being tasked. Ngozi Anosike said immediately they see you, they will tell you they don't want to talk before they will not want to drop money. Therefore, even when you are not expecting anything from them they still avoid you. Hence making it difficult for reporters to get exclusives from them. recently the 9th Assembly ended its first session without any Press briefing, there is supposed to be a briefing by the House Leader or House Committee Chairman on information.

Discussion of findings.

Three research questions were formulated for the study. The analysis of the data was done qualitatively based on the data collected through in-depth interview and participant. Data collected were transcribed and presented according to each respondents' view of the subject under investigation. The summary of the results according to research questions, were captured for analysis.

Research Question 1: whether friendship at the beat influence reporters of the Rivers State House of Assembly from being?

Finding to research question one revealed that that friendship at the beat affect objectivity as reporters dance to the whims and caprices of the pay masters at the beats they cover, thereby dampening their reports to suit their friends at the various beats. According to them, friendship at the beat is inimical to objectivity. Journalists should de familiarise themselves with beat as too much familiarity affects objectivity. Therefore, periodic review of reporters' beats is needed to create room for objectivity, fairness and balance in reportage. This result collaborates the statement of Jensen (2016) that NPR's ethics code does not address friendships with sources, only conflicts with family relationships, but many journalism ethics guides counsel against becoming too close to sources or those one covers. According to Poynter (as cited in Jensen, 2016) "Getting too close can jeopardize your objectivity. If you become friends, you may find yourself telling that source's side of the story — to the detriment of the other sides. You may withhold important information to protect the source unnecessarily. You may even avoid writing news articles because your source wants to suppress information."

Research Question 2: whether friendship by media owner, managers and editors affect objectivity in news stories emanating from the Rivers State House of Assembly?

Findings to research question two revealed that the media owners, managers and editors affect objectivity in news stories as brought by the beat reporters in the Rivers State House of Assembly. These media owners do not allow to do our job as required, they are always patronizing one lawmaker or the other, especially if they from the same constituent. It was observed that announcements for screaming and public hearings from the House of Assembly are most times sent directly to the bosses as a means of familiarization, ignoring the fact that it should come from the reporters.

Research Question 3: whether there are challenges facing reporters from accessing news from the State House of Assembly beat?

The result to research question three show that, it was agreed that there are challenges faced by beat reporter in reporting the Rivers State House of Assembly. Respondents have challenges such as poor allowances, in some cases non- payment of stipends, ignorance, ownership influences, poor working conditions, inadequate facilities. Some of them pointed to the fact that presently at the Rivers State House of Assembly, the recording room is out of place, and speakers are not working, making it difficult for especially the electronic to operate. This is because the electronic media such as the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation, Cool/Wazobia/Info, Rhythm and LoveFMetc need voice inserts for actuality reports. The correspondents of these media organizations would be moving from one office to the other to record the voices of Lawmakers who spoke at plenary. According to the respondents, this is one situation that no organization should allow, they anomaly should be corrected without delay. All these challenges makes it difficult for beat reporters to operate on their own.

Conclusion.

Familiarity with beats and friendship is inimical to effective practice of journalism as reporters tend to dance to the whims and caprices of their pay masters, thereby dampening their reports. It is argued that for journalists to be objective at the beats, periodic change from their organizations should be made, this will reduce the degree of familiarity and bring about balance, fairness and sound judgement in reporting events at the beats. Therefore, reporters need to be reshuffled from beat to beat to de-familiarise them and to enable them achieve balance, fairness and objectivity in their reportage, though it is often said that attaining objectivity and balance is difficult due to human frailties and negates the principles of specialization in reporting.

Recommendations

It is recommended, that:

1. Beats should be rotational to de-familiarize a reporter with a particular beat while ethical standards and considerations, should be the guiding principles of every reporter to enable objective and balance reporting at all times.
2. Media owners, News managers, and editors should keep their distance and help the reporters maintain their standard.
3. The Rivers State House of Assembly and indeed other State Assemblies should provide adequate facilities to help reporters perform their duties objectively

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