Safety of Journalists: Measures, Practices and Policies of Selected News Organisations

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THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS 2020: PRESS FREEDOM AND MEDIA CAPTURE

POSTER ABSTRACT

Background

As journalists work in the field, they are often confronted with threats or hazards that they might not have been prepared for. At such a moment, they automatically begin to work out a plan for safety. This planning and implementation process can be very challenging if the journalist has not been trained nor has prior knowledge of safety measures. Another perspective here is that if the journalist has a level of knowledge/awareness of the need for safety but perceives it as unimportant, he/she stands on a delicate precipice to be attacked or even killed. A journalist's knowledge has implications on the measures and practices that occur. Established policies or laws are also useful in safe guarding journalists. There are factors that motivate or de-motivate a journalist to undertake certain measures, practices or even enact policies in relation to safety on the job.

In 2012, Reporters Without Borders stated, from their research, that Nigeria was one of the most dangerous countries in Africa for journalists. In their research, they discovered that

between December 24th to March 24th that year, almost daily, journalists were being assaulted, arrested, hindered from accessing and distributing information. They described the atmosphere that journalists worked in as being 'insidious'. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists in its release of the 2013 Impunity Index for World Press Freedom Day, described Nigeria as one of the countries where journalists are murdered or assaulted routinely without perpetrators being fully charged and convicted. These routine assaults against journalists take various forms. Some forms are murder, assault, psychological threats to their lives, baseless confinement, arrests and convictions on fabricated illegal charges; attacks on their property in the form of vandalism or arson and random police raids on journalists' editorial offices or homes. Journalists in Nigeria have experienced such challenges over the years. The committee to protect journalists in Nigeria has recorded that many journalists have been attacked in Nigeria for one issue or the other that is often related to their work. This relates to their safety.

Safety is essential to human life. It is the total absence of hazards, and conditions that could lead to physical, psychological or even material harm. When the physical, psychological or material aspects of human life are put under control, in order to protect the health and welfare of an individual or community, safety can be said to be achieved. Safety is essential for daily life where individuals or a group of people recognize their ambition and safeguard it. It is a resultant effect of not only a dynamic equilibrium that has been established between different components of a given setting, but also a complex process where humans interact with their environment. Environment here encompasses the social, cultural, technological, political, economical and organizational environments. Therefore, safety must lead to an individual's feeling of comfort.

Organizations have a role to play in ensuring safety. They develop policies in order to increase communication, credibility, efficiency, legal counsel or even insurance brokers. Policies are set to ensure efficiency and a collaborative working experience. Policy creation is central for maintaining standards for how things are done consistently. It explains who, what, why and when an action is to be completed. Policies are closely related to procedures which are the steps outlined for policy implementation. Procedures are descriptive presentations of the actions taken for realization of policies. These actions often guide the fair and equitable treatment of all staff. In UNESCO's journalist's safety indicators, it is clearly stated that media organizations should have policies which protect the health and the safety of not just staff but freelance journalists. Despite these requirements or expectations, it appears that oftentimes staff in an organization

who have worked for a number of years think they understand the existing policies. Not so it seems for what they really have is a sense of how their co-worker and antecedent have managed similar situations in the past. Some staff work on instinct, addressing situations as they come with the hope that their assessment will result in the right decisions. Whichever approach is selected will certainly produce inconsistent results which could develop into misunderstandings, grievances and even lawsuits. A rippling effect from such decision or non-policy decision making is thus created and similar decisions by other co-workers begin to follow a similar trend. Therefore, the lack of policy documents often results in erroneous judgments by managers and staff in an organization. This just goes to show why a policy document is essential for every organization.

The welfare state of journalists working in any news organization is not dependent on just the economic and social factors related to the life of the journalist but majorly on how the media and communication systems are organized. Media policy measures and the welfare state of an organization together conceptualize the media welfare state. Therefore, policy documents are essential for sustaining a news organization's public. It attracts and retains satisfied employees by creating an environment where objectives are attained through logical and consistent management decision – making.

Research Questions

This paper was guided by the following research questions posed to provide a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

1. Do media organizations adopt specific measures for the safety of journalists?
2. Are there policies in the media that deal exclusively with the protection of journalists' physical and psychological safety?
3. What measures do journalists undertake to ensure their safety?

Theoretical Framework

The social judgment theory was propounded by Hovland and Sherif in 1980. It posits that an individual's perception is developed in the context of their attitudinal predispositions. Thus, when perception takes place, people compare messages received with their current point of view. This theory is an approach to persuasion through the use of cognitive explanations. When a decision is to be made, individuals tend to make an informed decision based on the structure of their existing relevant attitudes. These decisions can be categorized into three namely the latitude

of acceptance (outlining a range of acceptable ideas), the latitude of rejection (outlining a range of unacceptable ideas) and the latitude of non – commitment (a range of ideas that are neither acceptable nor unacceptable). So an individual's opinion is determined by their degree of tolerance.

Another process related to media perceptions is the 'confirmation bias', in which individuals engage in processes to seek, perceive, and recall information in a way that supports their predispositions. These processes can be used to explain the relational nature of how journalists handle safety on the job. Journalists have a perceived position of safety received from different media, experiences or deliberate training. These perceived positions are what confirm individuals' beliefs that could result in avoidance, attack or to forget anything that conflicts with their orientation whether those orientations pertain to individual journalists, news stories, media organizations or the media as a whole. The application of this theory to the research is in the assimilation and contrast effects. The contrast effect is based on the link between the importance of an issue to an individual and how they perceive it. Perceptual distortions here can lead to a polarization of ideas which is a result of latitude of rejection. The assimilation effect on the other hand is related to the latitude of acceptance. This is when the discrepancy between the actual state and the anchor point of the issue is at a minimal. With respect to the latitude of non-commitment, Hovland and Sherif interpret the effects as having a neutral reading. The journalists' measures, practices of safety and the guiding policies were assessed in line with the latitudes mentioned above. This theory was used to explain the status of journalists' safety in relation to available safety procedures at work.

Methodology

The research design selected for this study was qualitative (interviewing). A semi – structured interview guide was used to gather data for the study using the telephone interview. This design proved useful as it enabled the respondents to not only talk freely but be open and honest about the topic of discourse. This design was also effective for interviewing respondents across geographically dispersed areas. The population for the research comprised of respondents drawn from three geopolitical zones of the country namely the North West, Middle Belt (or North Central) and the South West. Each respondent is a registered member of the Nigerian Union of Journalists. Respondents provided safety data from their organizations, namely: Voice of Nigeria, Kano State Radio, Blue Print Newspaper, The Sun Newspaper and Daily Trust

Newspaper. To get the relevant respondents to this study, the snowball or chain – referral sampling technique was used. This non – probability sampling technique was found adequate for getting respondents who referred the researcher to other respondents that were useful to the study.

Key Findings from the Research

The following were deduced form the data gathered and analyzed.

1. Security officials accompany journalists only when they are with top government officials or in volatile areas.
2. The selected news organizations do not have an official safety policy document.
3. The journalism code of conduct and interpersonal communication between journalists forms the bedrock for journalists' personal safety policies.
4. Journalists' safety practice is largely determined by the individual.
5. Safety measures adopted by journalists are synonymous with UNESCO's safety guidelines.
6. There is a procedural guideline that journalists follow once safety has been compromised.
7. Journalists need 'safety' insurance cover.
8. Safety guidelines are usually drawn up and communicated before the national elections.
9. Safety guidelines, to a large extent, are orally communicated and active when a situation arises.

Conclusion

The practices and measures of safety in the selected organizations were determined to a large extent by the journalists themselves. Journalists in these selected news organizations, tend to employ safety measures based on their demographic location leading to a variation in policy and practice per location. This irregular safety measure has affected press freedom in the country. Therefore it is recommended that news organizations review and harmonize their safety policies to address the journalists' challenging reality. Also, sharing of secure information between media organizations or journalists, training, and levels of insurance should be part of a journalists work emolument or expectations.

The future potentials of this research are summarized thus:

1. There is need for research on journalists' safety policies in Nigeria and their determinant factors.

2. The documentation of journalists' safety measures and practices for future reference and development of better policies is a necessity.

3. The implementation of journalists' safety laws in Nigeria, or lack of it, should be studied to determine the factors responsible.

4. An investigation of news organizations use of oral communication in opposition to documented policies could provide insight on the art of communicating policies.