

THE PRESS AND ART JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA: AN APPRAISAL OF THE GUARDIAN NEWSPAPER

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Abstract

The Nigerian press has contributed immensely and commendably to the professionalism and development of modern art in Nigerian. For over 60 years the print media have through contributions by art journalists, art writers, art critics and historians alike projected the visual arts in the national newspapers and local tabloids around the country. In recent years one of the prominent newspapers in the country that have been championing the course of the visual arts The Guardian Newspaper. Deploying historical and analytical approaches, this study critically looks at the contribution of this newspaper to the development of visual arts. Additionally, it makes some suggestions on how to sustain the achievements made so far in this direction.

Keywords: The Nigerian press, Visual art journalism, The Guardian Newspaper

Introduction

According to the Advanced Learner's Dictionary, newspaper is a set of large printed sheets of paper containing news, articles, advertisements, etc, and published everyday or everyweek. Newspapers originates from single sheets of paper locally distribution to multi-page products with international distribution. As an economic and social phenomenon of our society, newspaper has become major force in shaping public opinion and influencing national and international efforts towards economic progress and global understanding. Leading financial dailies attracts the commerce tycoons all over the globe. Tabloids dress the newsstands of city transportation hubs, and popular underground publications appear or disappear at the change of a trend or movement (Brittner 22). Brittner further explained that newspaper stores have turned ordinary men and women into heros and have removed world leaders from power. If the newspaper can achieve all these, then the arts generally and visual arts in particular is not

an exception. Huge presses spew out hundreds of pages in single edition on a breakfast table 300 miles away (22).

There is no conclusive summary on the origin of newspaper by various scholars but it is quite clear that Italians messengers disseminated mass news as early as 59BC with the publication of daily events bulletins called Acta Diurna (23). This article do not intend to be elaborate about the origin and history of newspaper because of distraction, but modern newspaper evolved from single sheets of paper locally distributed to multipage products with international distribution. In Germany the first newspapers appeared in the early seventeenth century, in England the single sheet corantos were being published in 1621. (Brittner 24)

Today the newspapers industry has become one of the largest in the world. It employed thousands of people from editors, to investigating reporters, art reporters and writers, sport writers to carriers. It has survived wars, economic collapse, and social destruction, yet remains essentially the same type of medium that it was centuries ago which is pages of print communicating information to readers.

Features of a newspaper include first it must be published periodically at intervals not less than once a week, when mechanically reproduced and thirdly, anyone who can pay the price of admission must have access to the publication, that is it must be made available to everyone who can access it and not just a privileged few. Fourth, newspaper must vary in content and include everything of public interest to everyone and finally, publication must be timely with some continuity of organisation (22).

Print Journalism

It is not enough to discuss newspaper without defining what print journalism means because they are synonymous. Print journalism is defined as the art of gathering editorial and non-editorial material by professional writers with the purpose or intention of selling them in newspaper form (Ogunsiji 1). This information is either to widen their horizon or use it for formulating economic, social and political policies and by extension their own views on other socio-cultural endeavours such as the arts, culture and life generally. Ogunsiji (1) explained that print journalism has its own unique style, and skills which must be understood by anyone wishing to apply or make use of it. These skills involves the ability to recapitulate some of the jargon of the profession and be able to analyse the meaning they stand for. Print journalism is all about the ability to write news stories, edit news stories, prepare the page and crop and size picture. It is the science (or art) of news story writing, editing and page planning among other functions, but in this article we are looking at how all these functions bring to bear on the visual arts. In other words how writing news stories on visual arts in Nigeria had fared with Guardian newspaper as a case study. It is a preliminary discussion as this article will not be able to carry out an indepth analysis yet.

Brief History of Print Media in Nigeria

The history of Nigerian press or print media can be generally divided into four segments. These are the era of missionary journalism; the era of the alien-dominated press; the emergence of indigenous press and the dawn of modern Nigerian newspaper (Ogunsiji 6).

According to Ogunsiji (ibid), print journalism started in Nigeria in 1846 with the establishment of a printing press at Calabar by the Presbyterian mission. The main reason for installing the printing press was to increase the level of literacy among local people so that they would be able to acquire more knowledge through the reading of short stories and essays on various subjects, particularly religious matters. Although the Calabar experiment was short-lived but it succeeded in setting the ball of newspaper work rolling in Nigeria. Other missionaries later joined the newspaper production following the Presbyterians' example. (6).

Ogunsiji once again made us understand that one of such missionaries-turned-journalists was Henry Townsend, in 1854. He established his own printing press and inaugurated a printing school in the mission's compound in Abeokuta, five years later and founded the *Irohin* for the reading pleasure of Egba people. (6). Townsend's newspaper was published in Yoruba, every two weeks but later became bilingual in 1860 when an English language was added. The alien-dominated press refers to newspapers founded or published by non-Nigerians, who came from neighbouring countries. The first of these generation of newspapers was the one established by Robert Campbell on June 6, 1863, which he called the *Anglo-African*, another alien-founded newspaper was the *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* which was established by Richard Beale Blaize on November 10, 1860 (8).

Other alien-founded newspapers included the *Irohin Eko*, founded by Andrew Thomas on November 3, 1888, the *Weekly Times*, established by John Payne Jackson, on May 3, 1890, the *Lagos Weekly Record*, established by J.P. Jackson, the *Standard*, founded by J.S. Leigh on September 1, 1894 and the *Lagos Reporter*, founded by Victor Manson on September 12, 1898. Before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate in 1914, proprietors of newspapers started to use the word *Nigerian* in naming their papers. Some of the alien-founded newspapers which included the word *Nigerian* in their name plates were the *Nigerian Chronicles* established on November 20, 1908 by two brothers- Christopher Josephus Johnson and Emmanuel Johnson and the *Nigerian Times* which was founded by James Bright Davis in April 5, 1910 (9).

The next era in Nigeria print media were the ones founded by Nigerians, one of the early newspapers founded by a Nigerian was the *Nigerian Pioneer* which was established by Kitoyi Ajasa in Lagos in 1914. Ernest Ikoli entered the Nigerian printing industry with the establishment of the *African Messenger* on March 10, 1921. (10). The *African Messenger* later metamorphosed into *Daily Times* after being bought over by Adeyemo Alakija

and Richard Barrow both of whom are running the Nigerian Printing and Publishing Company which is affiliated to London Times. Ernest Ikoli as part of agreement became its first editor in 1926 (10).

Apart from those newspapers of Nigerian proprietorship earlier mentioned, other newspapers established between 1900 and the emergence of Dr. Azikiwe's West African Pilot in 1937 included the Lagos Daily News established by Herbert Macaulay in collaboration with Dr. J. Akilade Caulcrick in 1927, the Nigerian Daily Telegraph, established by Akin Fagbenro Beyioku on November 1, 1927, Akede Eko, founded by I.B.Thomas on June 1, 1929; the Nigerian Daily Mail, founded in 1930 by Ernest Ikoli; and the Comet founded in 1933 as a weekly and later daily newspaper merged with the Nigerian Amalgamated Press of Nigeria limited, the publishers of Nigerian Tribune. In 1958, Roy Thomson of Canada went into partnership with the ruling party in Western Region- the Action Group to form the Allied Newspapers of Nigeria which absorbed the Amalgamated Press and launched the Daily Express and Sunday Express in 1960 (11).

Apart from the West African Pilot Dr.Nnamdi Azikiwe published other papers like Eastern Nigerian Guardian, the Nigerian Spokesman, Southern Nigerian Defender and Eastern Sentinel among others (12). There was a dramatic changes and re-orientation in Nigerian press at the dawn of independence at that time government paid reasonable attention to the newspaper industry (3). According to Ogunsiji (13), the period between 1960 and 1966 saw many government newspapers springing up, among them was the Morning Post which was established in 1961 by the Tafawa Balewa administration for the purpose of providing adequate and better publicity for its activities.+The paper ceased to be published after Balewa's administration was toppled in 1966 (13).

By early 80s almost all the then 19 states had their own newspapers, by early 90s with the addition of more states bringing the total to 36 states with the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, more newspapers emerged. They include the Herald Newspaper by Kwara state Government, Daily Satellite own by Enugu state, Triumph Newspaper own Kano state, Observer own by Edo state, The Standard newspaper by Plateau state, Equity Newspaper own by Kebbi state , Stateman by Abia state, Abuja Today by Ministry of Federal Capital Territory Administration, Abuja, and hosts of others. Also the 70s through the 80s down to the 90s saw the beginning of a new era in Nigeria print media, as a crop of enterprising and vigorous publishers came into the scene. More independent and privately owned daily newspapers emerged. They included the Concord, established by late Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the Punch by late Olu Abodunrin, Vanguard by Sam Amukapemu, Thisday newspaper by Nduka Obaigbena, and recently some ex-governors and prominent politicians are now owners of newspaper outfits, among them are the Sun newspaper by Orji Uzo Kalu, Nation by Bola Tinubu, and Compass by Gbenga Daniel and of course the Guardian newspaper founded by late Alex Ibru and many other numerous to mention.

Visual Arts Journalism in Nigeria

Art journalism cannot be separated from art criticism. Both work symbiotically, while the former deals with dissemination of art news or information, the latter deals with the technical approach to writing art news. The definition of these terms will help us have clear understanding of what they stand for. Art criticism according to Ikwuemesi (181), is "an oral or written discursive strategy which aims to analyze, describe, and interpret works of art in order to enhance their understanding and appreciation." While Ikpakronyi (187) explain that:

Art criticism is a medium for analysing, discussing, interpreting and elucidating on art work. It is a vehicle for increasing access of art, for presenting art works to people who otherwise may not see it. It is a way of bridging the gap between artists and the people (audience or viewers). The role of art criticism therefore, is a supportive environment for art in the society.

He elaborated further that:

Art criticism is a presentation of supposedly informed opinion about what is right or wrong about an artistic effort, but this must be done objectively, as much as humanly possible. And as earlier stated, criticism of art works is popularly done after visits to exhibitions and artists' studios. (187)

Art criticism is not only done after visit to exhibitions and studios alone. Art criticism is also carried out on art books, book-catalogues, art talkshops, symposia, lectures, conferences, workshops and seminars, because art criticism could also be defined as "a branch of art scholarship" (Ikwuemesi 181). Among the numerous forms of art criticism, art journalistic criticism is most popularly and widely read. This is because of the means of communication, which is the print media, talking about newspapers and magazines. Art journalism is the process or art/science of reporting/writing about art, artists and art development, professionalism, practices and other art events through print media which comprises of newspapers, magazines, newsletters and other forms of print media. Other arts events as explained earlier include conferences, reviews, previews, books, symposia, seminars, publications etc.

One cannot really say when press issues on visual arts in Nigeria started, but the Nigerian Magazine which was initially called the "Nigerian Teacher" started publishing issues on culture as far back as 1923. In the same vein Udechukwu (233) made mention of one A.J.U.Ema who wrote a letter to the editor of Nigerian Magazine (No. 9, January 1937, p62) asking among other things, "what should guide a master in judging the work of his pupils?" Also

Ochigbo (135) citing Oloidi (1997) traced the history of art criticism to 1902, when Aina Onabolu succeeded in injecting western type of art into Nigeria. This was a period of establishments of print media as we have earlier discussed in history of print media.

Discussing the historical antecedence of art criticism/journalism in Nigeria, the Art historian and critic, Ola Oloidi (45) made us understand that good tradition of formalized art criticism was lacking before 1960. The critics of this period according to Oloidi were some of the editors of Nigerian Magazine, members of foreign interests (or missions) in Lagos and then Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. Others were the art patrons, the Nigerian Daily newspapers and various intellectuals in the humanities who, unfortunately, become the spokesmen for artistic experiences (45). By 1946 when the first exhibition centre was opened, Michael Crowther, wrote a piece in respect to the exhibition. Of course in the 60s, Ulli Bier wrote on works of prominent Nigerian Artists of that era, such as Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko. One also bears in mind that Mbari Mbayo writers were publishing in the 60s, but even at that time most publications especially art journals seldom discuss contemporary or modern Nigerian art, rather they concentrated mainly on Nigerian traditional art. Probably because traditional art was what is in vogue then. But then, contemporary Nigerian art as it is known then was jostling for relevance along side the traditional art. By 1960 people like George Okolo was already a regular review contributor to Daily Times (Udechukwu 221).

Art criticism, in newspapers, was more informational than critical before independence, and where it was critical, this was subjective and uninformed (Ola Oloidi 45). Oloidi further explained that art reviews, which were reasonably occasional, were also more biographical than technically analytical. According to Oloidi, art reviews were devoid of suitable academic and intellectual content. This was a period of journalistic criticism, a period of expiatory than critical art journalism. In the same vein Oloidi made us understand that Nigeria's independence in 1960 brought about the needed change in art journalism/criticism. Art criticism became an instrument in the development of (modern) Nigerian art. He further explained below:

This time, art criticism refused to worship the personality or individualistic achievements of the artist. Rather, attempts were made to acknowledge his creative and intellectual endowment, the philosophical and socio-historical tendencies in his works and the overall relevance of his creativity to life and nationhood. This was the state of art criticism and helped in shaping the beginning of new and more dynamic art traditions of the early post-independence period. (45)

By the 70s the tempo of press involvement in visual arts increased with the establishment of some cultural institutions such as the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) in 1975 and the hosting of the FESTAC 77 which is believed to have brought modern Nigerian art to the limelight. After the FESTAC, consistent art journalism started. Daily Times, Concord, Punch and some other independent newspapers were at the forefront of art

journalism. The 80s witnessed a crop of young vibrant art writers and most newspapers, have art columns which featured regularly. Some of the items in the Arts columns are reviews, previews, conferences, seminars, symposia, exhibitions, book reviews etc. These items or contents are grouped under visual arts, literary or performing arts. The Guardian Newspaper have over the years been consistent in publishing issues on Nigerian Arts especially the visual arts. The Newspaper contains such items like conference, review, events, books, exhibitions, issues, preview and publications.

Dike explained the importance of documentation in the practice and development of visual arts in Nigeria when he said that "discussion, seminars, colloquia, stampedes, journals and magazine publications have since the early 50s taken centre stage in the production, promotion and preservation of Nigerian art (3). These have been years of much writing, by way of documentation, inventories and sometimes publications of rare data on Nigerian modern art.+ The Guardian Newspaper through its consistent, regular and professional visual arts reportage/coverage has taken modern Nigerian visual arts to greater height in the aspect of documentation and publicity.

The Establishment of the Guardian Newspaper

According to Nnabuike (2006), the first publication of the Guardian Newspaper came out on the July 4, 1982 and it commenced publishing issues on visual arts from the first edition. From the on-set, the styles of publication were reviews and art criticism. It is important to note that the newspaper was founded by a team of intellectuals, mostly literacy scholars (authors, creative writers, critics and academics in humanities). There were such names as Wole Soyinka, Chinweizu, late Dr. Stanley Macebu and Dr. Ogunbiyi. Dr Reuben Abati,(current Special Assistant to the President on media matters who was once the chairman of the editorial board for years).

The Guardian is an independent newspaper, established for the purpose of presenting balanced coverage of events, and of promoting the best interest of Nigeria. It owns allegiance to no political party, ethnic community, religious or other interest group. Its primary commitment is to the integrity and sovereignty of the federation of Nigeria, and beyond that to the unity and sovereignty of Africa. The Guardian is a liberal newspaper, committed to the best traditions and ideals of republican democracy. The newspaper believes that it is the responsibility of the government not only to protect and defend the citizen, but also to create the political, social, economic and cultural conditions, in which all citizens may achieve their highest potential as human beings. It is committed to principle of individual freedom, but believes that all citizens have duties as well as rights.

The Guardian does not, in principle, object to the ideology of free enterprise, since this would be inconsistent with its commitment to individual liberty and freedom. But it believes that the state must intervene judiciously in the economic life of the nation, in order to minimize the adverse effects of free

and capital for their own benefit. The newspaper believes it is the duty of the state to ensure that less privileged citizens have reasonable and fair access to the basic necessities of life. The Guardian has subjected itself to upholding the virtues of justice, probity in public life, equal access to the nation's resources, and holds that she can best fulfill her international obligations only if her own security and integrity are guaranteed. (The Guardian Year Diary, 2007).

The above is what the newspaper stands for and has gain reputation as one of the most read and most circulated newspapers in Nigeria. To the arts community in general and the visual arts in particular, the Guardian has always remain the foremost means of publishing their activities. Late, Dr Alex Uruemu Ibru (1945-2011) was the founder and publisher of the newspaper.

The Arts Desk

The art column or desk had Ben Tomoloju as its first Art Editor. Ben Tomoloju is a dramatist, who later retired at the position of Deputy Editor, the Guardian (Daily). Jahman Anikulapo, succeeded him as Art Editor. When Anikulapo became editor of the Guardian Sunday in 2004, Kabir Alabi Garba, took over. Among early staff writers on the Arts desk are names like Andy Ezeani, (former editor of Champion and now media consultant to a former Senate President), Jahman Anikulapo, Toyin Akinosho (now in Chevron), Sunny Aragba Akpore, Okoh Aihe (now in Vanguard), Bankole Ebisemiju, Steve Ayorinde (now in Sun Newspaper), Ozolua Uhakheme (now in Daily Independent), Chido Okafor and so on.

The Art Desk and Information Dissemination

In strict newspaper standard where a publication's progress is guided mostly by the paper being able to move closer to the people, the Guardian's Art pages are progressive. Nnabuife (2006) believe that the art column/desk has moved from a heavy sounding, too elite, ivory-tower-leaning stutus to a more larger middle class oriented but still intellectual paper.+ Initially, the paper hadly pay attention to issues relating to popular art genres and trends such as (Nigerian) home videos, fashion, styles, comedy. Gardening streets, concerts et al, but now they do and this had attracted the less educated to reading the paper. The paper took a step further by introducing an all-colour magazine titled LIFE+ in 2005. The LIFE magazine though rested was created in the Art Desk, which supervised and feed it with stories. Jahman Anikulapo, later became its editor. The magazine also contains issues on arts just as published in the Daily Guardian's art pages.

The LIFE magazine is a society-oriented all-colour publication aimed at showcasing the vogue trends in society, but characteristically written in a manner that is assumed to attract commendable readership, especially among women, teenagers and the soft prose inclined elite. The LIFE

magazine has been able to sell visual arts to a wider audience, outside her top middle class which is the original catchments of the Guardian.

Art Reportage in The Guardian: A Critical Appraisal

Art reviewing is the most prominent aspect of visual arts reportage in the Guardian Newspaper. In the business, some editor has no particular policy about art reviewing or criticism as the case may be and permit each review to go through on its merits. This is not the case with the Guardian. Just like earlier explained, the art review is basically on the Arts-visual, performing and literary. There is a trait of not only a journalistic criticism but an art criticism laden with professionalism. The newspaper's reportage on visual arts activities or events and the critical analysis of art exhibitions with emphasis on works on display, tell more of reporters who make serious attempts at understanding and discussing arts. These reporters have the singular advantage of being creative writers with and understanding of the creative process. (Udechukwu 221)

It is not the intention of this article to go into indepth discussion on art criticism since our interest is basically information dissemination on the visual arts, through the press. But it is obvious that art criticism cannot be isolated when it comes to newspapers coverage of the visual arts, this is where journalistic art criticism comes in. Journalistic critics either full or part time over the years had contributed review columns in newspapers. There were people like George Okoro, Adeleye Fagbemi, Willy Bozimo, Chris Ikeoku, Gab Oviogbodun, Dele Jegede et al in the 60s and 70s and Tajudeen Sowole, Kabir Alabi Garba, Chuka Nnabuife, Ben Tomolaju, Okechukwu Uwaezuoke, Oji Onoko, Maurice Archibong, Bridget Onochie, MacPhilips Nwachukwu and a host of others from the 80s down to the new millennium. According to Udechukwu (221) these critics range from those who are just carrying out an assignment or a chore to those who make serious attempt at understanding and discussing art. There are those who also report with very constructive criticism and those who only pick catalogue and photocopy.

The Guardian newspaper over sometimes have experienced both side of the coin. At a time there were columnists whose interest in criticism is overtly marginal, for who a review is nothing more than a catalogue of works on show interspersed with quotes from the horse's (artist) mouth and occasionally a few personal remarks in praise or denigration (221). But as the visual arts improved the crop of writers also improved, with people like Chuka Nnabuife, a trained visual artist turned writer (although he has left the Guardian for Compass newspaper recently), the tide of art reportage have changed. Nnabuife, who was a senior writer with the Art Desk was trained as a painter at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Institute of Management and Technology (IMT) Enugu. His critical judgement of visual arts issues had greatly enriched the art column, apart from employed art journalist-cum-critics, the Guardian have a host of art columnist who are either studio masters, art scholars and professional critics. Some of these

columnists are Mufu Onifade, Kunle Filani, Kunle Adeyemi, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Tajudeen Sowole, Akin Onipede just to mention but few. Apart from art criticism, other issues that have taken much prominence in the visual arts reportage is the Society of Nigerian Artist (SNA) issues and the politicking within the association. One would commend the art column of the Guardian newspaper for its unbiased reportage of Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) activities, not taking side with any factions in the over forty-year-old association during its turbulent years. Probably it may be the consistent press admonition from concerned individuals that seems to have resorted to certain element of orderliness to the only statutory association through which visual artists are known in this country. The National Gallery of Art, which is the government institution assigned with visual arts administration is also discussed every now and then.

Problems Envisaged

The arts is too big to be in one editorial desk, there is need for expansion. There are very few journalists who are well trained or are keen to know the nuances and underlined ideologies of the several specialized genre of the arts. The arts bit is about the least lucrative field to report in the media culture like Nigeria's, where not many media houses pay well. Hence the few good brains in the field leave at the call of any brighter opportunity. At times most newspapers editorial boards hardly give attention to the art bits and treat art news with contempt. At times especially under pressure arts columns could be forfeited for other special reports or features especially politics, this is gross negligence and ignorance. A recent industrial action in Guardian newspaper led to mass retrenchment of workers including journalists amongst them staff writers in the art bit. This to great extent has affected art journalism.

Conclusion / Recommendation

There is an urgent need for solely art newspapers, magazines preferable not journals yet, because there are a lot of academic art journals which are scholarly inclined and less accessible to the average readers. There is a vacuum for training facilities and endowments for art reporters and editors. Many art trends are going on globally without the knowledge of many of these writers, thus there is need for accessibility to information on trends in the visual arts globally. This can be achieved by management of these newspapers to embark on sponsoring of their art reporters to international art biennials and workshops, world class museums, where information on the arts could be easily obtained just like journalists (sport writers) are sponsored for the coverage of international soccer tournaments such as CAF African Cup of Nations and the FIFA world Cup tournaments.

The art pages in Nigeria newspapers are not enough. Elsewhere in developed nations, art pages are more than for instance sports pages, but in Nigeria the case is different. The editorial board should be able to assign more pages to the arts just like they do to sports and special reports especially politics.

There is need for sharpening and reshaping the appreciative skills of arts writers, this can be achieved by constant workshops and symposia for art reporters and writers, it will be an avenue to bring to the fore the creative essence of art criticism as a vocation rather than just a meal ticket.

Still on criticism, visual arts writers should not be so enthralled by the achievements of anyone so that they do not end up praising everything an artist produces. Also there should be no bamboozling the readers with artistic jargons since the targeted audiences are the average literate Nigerians whose appreciation of arts should be the watchword of these writers.

Art criticism in newspapers should be less scholarly and not laden with too much technical jargons, so that average Nigerians can participate fully in visual arts documentation which had for years been the exquisite rights of art scholars, thus making the visual artists the producers and consumers of their own merchandise, this should be reversed.

Having said all these, it is imperative to inform us that artists also have some role to play in effective coverage of their activities. They are not expected to sit in their studios and expect Nigerians to know about them through the print media published and financed by others. They should be able to contribute their own quota by advertising their studios and their latest artistic projects or programmes as it is the case in the foreign nations where artists place advertisement for themselves and their studios, their creative agenda or studios/galleries programmes for the year. This will go a long way to keep the art column alive.

Since newspapers are object of information dissemination, visual art, which has been rarely appreciated by Nigerians, need the print media to get to the heart and conscience of the people. This will enhance art appreciation, preservation and patronage.

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