

Cameroon Private Print Journalists Perception of the National Communication Council

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ABSTRACT

Objectives

The existence of a council to regulate and check media excesses has been recognised as a necessity in other parts of the world. In Cameroon, there is presently a debate over the role and powers of the National Communication Council, also known as the NCC. This study aimed at reaching a comprehensive assessment of Cameroon print journalists' perception of the National Communication Council. That is, to understand their continuous criticisms of sanctions issued by the council.

Methodology

The research problem was addressed by conducting qualitative interviews with journalists from 12 newspapers found in 3 cities: Buea (South West Region) and Douala (Littoral Region) and Yaounde. A phenomenological research approach coupled with Colaizzi 1978 phenomenological qualitative data analysis was used gather and interpret data.

Findings

Interviews revealed that Cameroon private print journalists consider the National Communication Council as an organ which is not autonomous with members being appointed by the Head of State and therefore not completely independent of the Executive as they should be. Consequently, it is recommended that media professionals should be associated in the formation of a new organ and that the law creating this organ should be enacted by the parliament.

Limitations

The recruitment journalists from journalists from the private press was justifiable to conduct this study. However, the sample selection which was limited to member of the private newspapers and therefore excluding members from other types of media like tv, radio and online can limit the generalization of this to other member of the media landscape.

Keywords: *Journalists, private press, national communication council, regulation.*

1.1. Background

This study on Cameroon print journalists' perception of the National Communication Council stems from the fact that journalists seem to always criticise the council decisions. The National Communication Council (NCC) is a regulatory and consultative body, with legal capacity and financial autonomy. It is placed under the Prime Minister, Head of Government. Set up by Law No. 90/052 of 19 December 1990 on freedom of Social Communication, its organisation and functioning are governed by Decree No. 2012/038 of 23 January 2012 reorganising the National Communication Council. The NCC is made up of nine (9) members including a

Chairman and a Vice-President. The current members were appointed by the presidential decree No. 2013/044 of 22 February 2013.

To fulfil its missions, the NCC has a General Secretariat, under the authority of a Secretary General, appointed by decree of the President of the Republic. The NCC provides guidance on the overall policy on social communication, the attribution of audio-visual communication licenses to private enterprises and the distribution of radio-electric frequencies allotted for the broadcasting of radio and television schedule. The Council can also make recommendations pertaining to laws and regulations with respect to social communication, professional ethics on social communication, protection of human rights and dignity by the media, protection of women, children and youths by the media, and transparency, pluralism, and the balance of programmes in communication enterprises. These are basically the primary role of the National Communication Council.

But, where the relationship between the Council and the press becomes conflicting is at the level of regulation. In fact, Decree No. 2012/038 of 23 January 2012 reorganising the National Communication Council, in paragraph 2 of chapter 3, gives the Council the prerogatives to temporarily sanction media organs for a period not exceeding six months and to pronounce definitive bans. Examples of such sanctions were in the NCC press release of February 25, 2015. The newspaper *La Nouvelle* and its Publisher Jacques Blaise Mvie were suspended for a period of six months while the newspaper *DEPECHE du Cameroun* and its Publisher Gilbert Avang were suspended. Even though these sanctions are meant to promote best professional practices in the press, journalists are highly sceptical about their credibility since they are pronounced by people appointed by the government. In fact, since the “reactivation” of the Council in January 2012, journalists have been contesting and rejecting its role, especially the new powers given to the Council, particularly those highlighted in articles 3 and 4 of the above-mentioned decree. Journalists feel uncomfortable with these powers which used to be placed under the Ministry of Communication and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation. *Le Messager* in its issue No. 3518 of 25 January 2012 published an article concerning the decree reorganising the Council. The title was: “Medias, Alerte, La Censure revient?” (Media, Alert, Is this the return of censorship?). This headline suggests that, as far as journalists are concerned, NCC is tantamount to censorship, which means they have gone back to the years before the 1990s; a time when the government was firmly controlling the mass media. For them, it seems to be a soft way of reintroducing censorship. Indeed, in page 5, it is written within the article: “l’on craint ce nouveau pouvoir donné au CNC dans la mesure où cet organe, selon l’alinéa 3 du décret, est placé auprès du Premier ministre, chef du gouvernement et n’est pas totalement indépendant du pouvoir exécutif” (There are concerns about this new power given to the NCC because, according to paragraph 3 of the decree, this body is placed under the authority of the Prime minister and is not totally independent from the Executive).

Another important issue related to the statute of the National Communication Council, is coming from the Journalists Trade Union which recently, through the voice of their President Denis Nkwebo, stated that the mandate of the council was terminated since December 2014. In fact, the January 2012 decree reorganising the council states in article 15 paragraph 3 that in case of vacancy of the president of the Council exceeding a period of 6 months, the President of the Republic in relation with the Prime Minister has to appoint a new president. In other words, the mandate of the Vice President of the council, which was to last for 6 months since the death of the President of the council Bishop Befé Ateba on 4 June 2014, is terminated since December 2014. And because it has not been renewed, it is therefore illegal. The direct implication is that, due to this illegality, the council cannot sanction media anymore because it is not legitimate. This new development worsened a situation which was already tensed. It worsened the situation because media which were sanctioned by the council went to the extent of rejecting the council decisions. Their arguments were that the council was not a legitimate institution anymore. For example, the private television *Afrique Media* which was closed by the police in August 2015 because they did not comply with the Council decisions. This is the present state of the relationship between the Council and Cameroon journalists. On one side, there is the National Communication Council, the regulatory

agency passing sanctions on media and on the other side Cameroon media which have deliberately refuse to recognise the Council as their regulatory agency and therefore reject its decisions.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Media regulatory bodies around the world exist primarily not to sanction mass media organs, but to ensure that media professionals abide to their code of ethics. They participate in creating a conducive atmosphere in the society by making sure that both journalists and their readers' rights are respected. It implies that apart from screening media reports, they equally participate in enforcing journalists' rights.

The case of the British press is because it has been out of state regulation for a long time. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, there was no law regulating the field. According to Media Policy Project (2014), except for wars or conflict situations, the press was free and not under any form of control by the government. This lack and absence of control of the press led to unethical practices on the part of journalists, which later became a public concern. These complaints led to the establishment of a series of Royal Commissions and other official inquiries. This first step towards the establishment of regulatory bodies was a failure because of the inappropriate measures.

In July 2011, following the "phone hacking scandal" at the News of the World, all stakeholders agreed to establish a committee whose role was to check the excesses of the press in terms of ethical reporting. This was done by a senior judge of the Court of Appeal in England and Wales, Sir Brian Leveson, who published his report in November 2012. One year later, that is on 18 March 2013, the stakeholders concluded that the Leveson Report was to be implemented by the "Royal Charter on Self-Regulation of the Press".

As we can see, the issue of press regulation is a world affair. Thus, considering the importance of regulation, the Vice-President of the National Communication Council, Mr Peter Essoka, on 17 March 2015, published a press release where he was calling journalists' attention on some of the fundamental journalistic values. He informed the public and media professionals of the security crisis Cameroon is going through as a result of sporadic incursions by foreign groups in the Far North and East regions and called media professionals to be cautious while playing their threefold role of informing, educating and building social reliance, in order to avoid throwing their weight behind indisputable Republican values notably national unity and solidarity, as well as the protection of the nation's territorial integrity.

This communiqué of the head of the National Communication Council came once again to remind us that there are discrepancies in the journalism profession and of the need of such an institution to set the framework under which journalists should do their job to avoid chaos.

But, since this was issued by the NCC, it faced violent criticisms from journalists, who, through the media, rejected this call of the regulatory agency in the name of freedom of the press. The issue brought back on the table the debate on the role of the National Communication Council and at the same time, that of media regulation.

Therefore, this study aims at documenting and examining the reasons of the conflict existing between journalists and the National Communication Council. Journalists seem to seldom agree with the decisions of the National Communication Council. This conflicting atmosphere is the consequence of the non-acceptance by journalists of the NCC mandate. In fact, since the decree reorganising and appointing officials of the Council, journalists did not hide their disappointment with the Council. The reason being that since the NCC is placed under the authority of the Prime Minister, thereby of the government; the members appointed will be loyal to state authorities to the detriment of the press. According to journalists, by opting to appoint officials, instead of allowing them to elect their representatives, the government was reintroducing censorship. Therefore, the problem seems to be the rejection of the National Communication Council by journalists. This problem more precisely lies in the status of the Council which journalists consider as subservient and therefore not reliable. This study wants to find out from

Cameroon journalists if it is true that the problem between journalists and the NCC is that they do not see it as being autonomous. What can be the reasons for such a situation? This is the question which is going to drive this study. Doing so may potentially help transform the field of journalism. Because it will give a better understanding of journalists' expectations towards the media regulation body and may participate in helping the Council to have a clear definition of what journalists think it may look like.

1.3. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to document journalists' perception of the National Communication Council.

1.3.1. Secondary objectives

- Document reasons for the non-acceptance by journalists of the NCC.
- Propose a model of regulation of the media.

1.4. Research questions

- What are the reasons for the non-acceptance by journalists of the NCC?
- What form of regulation do journalists think can be acceptable?

1.5. Theoretical Framework

1.5.1. Siebert et al., Social Responsibility Theory, 1956

Ten years after the conclusions of the commission, the social responsibility theory of the press was coined by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm around 1956. They drew their inspiration from the results of the Hutchins Commission.

Two core ideas emerged from this theory. Firstly, it was the responsibility of media given their powerful position, to be careful with the type of information they pass on to the public. And consequently, failure to professionally exercise this responsibility might imply the need for a regulatory body to enforce it.

Therefore, we can conclude that both the commission and the theory have in common the concept of social responsibility. This is because of the place the media occupy in the society.

The theorists highlight that, when necessary, the government should act to protect the freedom of its citizens. The acts of government mentioned include legislation to forbid flagrant abuses.

According to Hutchins (1947), "social responsibility should be reached by self-control, not government intervention".

From this theory, journalists are expected to "accept and fulfil certain obligations to society and meet these obligations by setting high standards of professionalism, truth, accuracy and objectivity" (Baran, 2009, p. 466).

The theory enjoins the media to be socially responsible by adhering to best journalistic practices. Thus, it discourages acts and practices that have the tendency to lose their sound judgment in making editorial decisions. Social responsibility calls for responsible and ethical industry operation.

Owens-Ibie (1994), who gave a contextualised definition of the social responsibility theory from the Nigerian perspective, posited that the social responsibility of the press resides in their capacity to fulfil their watchdog role of the government. That is, to keep the masses inform on what their officials do. For him, the press should also

promote the debate of ideas; encourage the masses participation in the management of their affairs. And failure to do so will enable the government to remain unchecked.

1.5.2. Structural Functionalist Theory

1.5.3 Historical Context

By the middle of the nineteenth century, vast improvements in manufacturing technology spawned an unprecedented period of economic growth for several nations throughout Western Europe. Buoyed by concepts such as Rationalisation, Division of Labour, and encouraged by the 'laissez-faire' economic principle, businesses experienced an exponential increase in manufacturing productivity (Hackett, 1992). However, this era of industrialisation was a double-edged sword. The promise of employment and improved living standards prompted a flurry of migration as people abandoned small communities and flocked to industrial centres and coastal towns. And, as government planners grappled with the new challenges brought on by rapid urbanisation and poor working conditions, citizens became recalcitrant; frustrated with inadequate solutions to their growing concerns. A period dotted with revolts soon followed and, in 1848, revolutions engulfed Europe's major centres. While the new social issues consumed political and social agendas (Kagan, Turner, and Ozment, 1979), philosophers soon joined in the fray to bring their theories to bear in search for solutions.

The structural-functional model is a sociological perspective that considers society as made up of different parts working together to promote solidarity and stability. It posits that our livelihood habits are formed by social structures, which are relatively stable patterns of social behaviour. These social structures are meant to develop cohesion among members of the society. Family and school, for instance, have different functions in a society, such as socialisation, learning, and social placement.

Functionalism postulates that social practices and institutions are in correlation with the needs of the society and of individuals (Merton, 1957). Society is seen as an ongoing system linked together with the tendency of making essential contribution to continuity and order. According to McQuail (2005), in an organised social life, the mass media is a contributor to the needed stability, cohesion and maintenance of the society.

In this regard, unethical practices in journalism have the penchant to defeat the virtues of accuracy, consistency, supportiveness, and the complete picture representation of the working of society and the social environment.

The mass media is viewed as maintaining society with ripple effects of its roles in society being its terminal reward. So, according to McQuail (2005), the stability and maintenance of the society depends on media ability to respond to both individuals and institutions' needs.

In McQuail's opinion, to ensure that the subsystems of society work effectively in linkage, the mass media are a tool for the democratic development of the society.

Just like the social responsibility theory, the structural functionalist theory places an emphasis on the social responsibility of the press.

1.6. Literature Review

1.6.1. The National Communication Council

The National Communication Council is a consultative body placed under the authority of the Prime Minister, Head of Government. Its main mission is to assist the authorities in the elaboration, implementation and follow up of the national policy on communication. Set up by Law No. 90/052 of 19 December 1990 on freedom of Social Communication, its organisation and functioning are governed by Decree No. 2012/038 of 23 January 2012 reorganising the National Communication Council. The NCC is made up of 9 members including a Chairman and

a Vice-President. The current members were appointed by the presidential decree No. 2013/044 of 22 February 2013.

1.6.2. Cameroon

This situation is also true in the case of Cameroon where journalists rely on outside sources to report on stories concerning the country most especially the presidency and its commander in chief. In fact, the news release of the National Communication Council calling on journalists who rely on foreign sources as news sources is a vivid example. Indeed, the online media *Le Monde* in its edition of March 14, 2014 published an article discussing President Paul Biya's health condition. This article was relayed by majority of private newspapers, who seized the opportunity to report on the issue, which had become taboo in Cameroon.

According to Nyamnjoh (1996), despite the liberalization laws of the 1990s, Cameroon media laws remain about the most repressive in Africa. The author is of the opinion that the December 1990 media law changed extraordinarily little in practice. In fact, on January 4, 1996, Law No. 96/04 was promulgated, modifying some provisions of Law No. 90/052 of December 19, 1990. This new law was not compelling publishers to submit their papers to administrative authorities for censorship but rendered the registration process more cumbersome. We moved from declaration to authorisation. The administrative authorities were now having the possibility to accept or reject a newspaper registration. By doing so, the regulator reinstated the former 1990 law that was abolished. Added to this, the 1996 law gives the opportunity to an individual, if he/she thinks that his/her honour, dignity, esteem, reputation, or private life has been stained, to obtain the seizure of a newspaper by the competent administrative authority. A vivid example is the case of the minister delegate at the Presidency Mr Atanga Nji who submitted a complaint to the National Communication Council for defamation. In fact, his complaint was mostly against all the private newspapers who cited his name in the *Campost* case because he was summoned by the Special Criminal Court. Fortunately, or unfortunately for him, the complaint commission concluded that there was no case because journalists only reported on decisions of the court.

The point Nyamnjoh (1996) is making here is that in Cameroon, the government plays a game of give and take. This can be seen with the setting up of the NCC. In fact, giving such arbitrary powers to an institution placed under the Prime Minister can be laudable in principle, but in practice it implies an independence from the Executive that has not been evidenced by recent cases against journalists.

The situation portrayed by the above-mentioned author is equally described in the *African Media Barometer Cameroon (2014)*. According to the *African Media Barometer Cameroon (2014)*, the media regulatory body is not independent. This lack of autonomy and independency can be explained by the fact that, though members of the Council are journalists in majority, the latter are appointed by a presidential decree. This model is problematic because it implies that the members of the NCC are not independent since their decisions can be influenced by the authority who appoints them. Added to this, another argument is that the Council does not have a budget; they do not have financial autonomy. Their budget is placed under the Prime Minister Office, which constitutes another constraint in their security tenure and autonomy. And lastly, the renewal of members of the Council is left to the discretionary power of the Head of State. This could be the reason why there is non-acceptance of the Council by gentlepeople of the press who believe that it is an instrument used by the government to indirectly control mass media. The implication of various stakeholders like the Presidency, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Communication under which the Council is placed by one way or another, make media professionals to think that NCC decisions instead of being in the interest of the public are working hand in gloves with the government.

1.6.3. Nigeria

According to Nosaze (2008), [there is] no single and specific law that may be described as a censorship law in Nigeria; however, there exists a battery of provisions in various laws that individually amount to censorship in their effect and collectively create a censorious environment for the Nigerian mass media. (p. 8)

For example, in Chapter 7 of the Criminal Code of 1990, there is what is known as sedition and seditious or undesirable publications, which are the products of a 'seditious intention'. It defines a seditious intention in Section 502 as one to create, among other things, hatred, contempt, or disaffection against the government, the president, or the governor of a state, to create discontent in the populace, or to promote hostility between social classes.

She is of the opinion that in Nigeria, the regulatory body is not independent of state authorities. Discussing on the Nigerian Press Council and the National Broadcasting Commission, Nosaze (2008), asserts that:

These regulatory bodies are not independent of the state authorities and are in fact administrative extensions of the federal government. The executive secretary of the Nigerian Press Council is a presidential appointee on the recommendation of the minister of information and culture. Although other members of the council are supposedly drawn from the media industry, the NPC law transforms them into government functionaries: Section 5A (2) of the law states they are to enjoy the same conditions of service as those of people serving in equivalent positions in the federal civil service. Similarly, the chairperson and director-general of the National Broadcasting Commission are appointees of the president on the recommendation of the minister of information. The members of the committee are appointed by the president. Although the NBC law requires that they be drawn from various interest groups including civil society, the mass media, the Ministry of Information, and the state security agencies, it makes no provision for consultation with these sectors in respect of the selection of their representatives. Further, the law empowers the minister of information to issue directives to the commission and puts the latter under obligation to implement such directives. (Nosaze, 2008, p. 9)

It appears that in the Nigerian media landscape, the state of media remains ambiguous. This is because, even though media operate in a free context, this freedom is determined by state authorities through their regulatory agencies. This situation is equally like what is going on in Cameroon where, despite the 1990 law on freedom of the press establishing freedom of expression, the government through a series of recent laws especially those of January 2012, has put in place an organ strictly under the supervision of government authorities.

1.7. Methodology

A phenomenological research approach coupled with Colaizzi 1978 phenomenological qualitative data analysis was used gather and interpret data. In-depth Interviews were used to collect data. A total of 12 journalists were interviewed. Participants were selected based on their year's experiences in the field of journalism. Purpose sampling was used to select participants in the study. This is because one hand the study was focusing on private media practitioners and on the other hand, the study equally focuses on those media which were sanctioned by the national communication council.

1.8. Findings

the findings are presented and discussed. The narrative style adopted makes use of quotations, summaries, etc. The main body of data under analysis and interpretation is interview data. Texts that are quoted are those that are deemed to be the most concise and useful. Presentation of themes was used for analytic reasons.

1.9. Findings

Need for regulation

Out of nine respondents, eight felt that media in Cameroon needed a regulatory body due to the invasion of the field by amateurs. They believe that like in any other profession, there was a need to have a regulator whose role is to ensure best practices among members of the profession.

One respondent stated that:

Everywhere in the world we need a media regulator. All sectors of activities are having a regulator. It is always useful to have a media regulator.

Another respondent went further by outlining the reason why there was a need for a media regulator:

Of course, the journalism profession in Cameroon should be regulated. This is because when we see the diversity of media organs and the ethical faults done by them daily, we quickly understand that there is a crucial need for a media regulatory body. That is, an organ whose role is to set up the framework under which professionals should work. Police was created because there are some people who are not willing to respect the law. Therefore, police were created to supervise and check people's behaviour. And it is the same for media. The NCC was created to regulate the activities of the media daily.

This is a clear indication that respondents, who are journalists, have concluded that media in Cameroon, due to their increasing number, need an entity to regulate them. So, for most respondents, there is no problem concerning the existence of a regulatory body, and the problem lies somewhere else. One of the respondents in line with this stated that: The creation of the NCC is not the problem. The problem lies in the way it carries out its duties.

This statement gives us a clue on the reason why journalists of the private press disagree with the National Communication Council. They are not against the idea of the existence of the NCC and even recognise the need for it. Another respondent stated:

Due to the invasion of the profession by quacks and the scandalous publications we observe, we need a media regulator to check the excesses.

Self-Regulation

Although majority of respondents agreed on the fact that there was a need for a media regulator, all of them think that regulation should be done by journalists themselves.

One respondent stated:

The regulation must be done by a committee of peers because their position gives them the ability and skills to evaluate journalists' behaviours. In fact, journalists should be regulated by their peers.

Another respondent equally said:

In every part of the world, every profession has its organ of regulation. For instance, when you take the National order of medical doctors or the National order of lawyers, those organs are the ones organising the profession with the tutorship of the state. So, with the journalism field, we cannot understand why someone else come and regulate us. Journalists want to be regulated by their peers chosen by them. This is because only my colleague can clearly tell me where I did a mistake. Members of the National Communication Council should be chosen among

experienced journalists who have achieved national and international recognition. And because we trust their moral integrity, their skills, journalists will be disposed to follow their instructions. You cannot go and take somebody that journalists do not respect because of their incompetence or somebody who has 10 years of experience to come and tell me how to do my job, particularly me with 25 years of experience. It is a problem.

It implies that respondents share the view that journalists should be the ones regulating themselves. Furthermore, they think that those regulating the profession should be chosen and elected by their peers and not the government. This is because they know among themselves their personal achievements, those who have achieved national and international recognition and mostly those who have been in the profession for ages. By opting for this model of representation, respondents believe that journalists of the private press will be more disposed to follow their instructions. They clearly debunk government regulation. In this line, one respondent stated:

I am in favour of self-regulation. The press herself should take the initiative to regulate. In other words, journalists should organise themselves for the purpose of self-regulation. To foster freedom of the press in Cameroon, regulation should not come from the government.

Therefore, for journalists they should be allowed to set up their regulatory body and elect their peers as representatives as other professions in the society are doing. Besides, another respondent declared that apart from self-regulation, journalists practise auto-regulation in their newsroom. That is, for the respondent, journalists have this social responsibility to check whether what they are doing is good or wrong and weigh the consequences of their actions. This is already a form of regulation:

First, there is auto-regulation that is, in each newsroom, there is need to take into consideration the social responsibility of the journalists. This is because journalists should know what to say and not, differentiate between private and public life. All this is already a form of regulation. Therefore, if there was a body to regulate media in Cameroon, it should derive from journalists themselves and not something that is imposed on them by decree.

Co-regulation

Two of the respondents believed journalists, of course, should be the one regulating themselves, but they should do that in the presence of the government which is going to play the role of an observer and potentially of referee in case of conflicts arising in the council. They believe that journalists should not solely handle the regulation. According to these two respondents, if such is to happen, conflicts are going to arise between journalists themselves. Therefore, the government should set the legal environment under which such regulation should be done.

One of the two respondents said: The council should be made of journalists chosen by their peers, the state and any other profession gravitating around the media.

The other respondent stated:

In every part of the world, every profession has its organ of regulation. For instance, when you take the National order of medical doctors or the National order of lawyers, those organs are the ones organising the profession with the tutorship of the state.

It should be mentioned that though they referred to the state as one of the stakeholders in the regulation of media, they still believe that journalists should remain the main actors in the regulation. That is, journalists should be the one selecting who among their peers have the required skills to evaluate their work. Secondly, they believe that like with their colleagues from other professions, the council should be the one setting its own structure, roles, and functions. Such structure should be enshrined in the fundamental law of the country to avoid government interference.

Lack of independence

All the respondents concluded that the National Communication Council was not independent. According to them, it was impossible to talk of independence for various reasons. And this contributes to rendering the atmosphere tense between members of the profession and the council.

One respondent stated:

[...] it is difficult to think of their independence when we know that their appointment and promotion depends on the executive branch of the government. Therefore, it will be difficult to think of the independency of the NCC when we know the relations and attachment it has with the prime minister office, the presidency, and the minister of communication. All this contributed to create a tensed atmosphere between the council and journalists.

One respondent stated:

The NCC is not politically independent because most of the journalists assigned there are chosen mainly because they are, politically, close to power. For example, Peter Essoka who acted as President of the NCC up to the end of the interim period is a retired journalist of CRTV. Many other members come from state-owned media. Even those coming from private media are not really experienced and reputed journalists who are able to impact decision-making in the NCC. So, most of the NCC members are close to power and the way they were appointed reflects the fact that this body is a dismemberment of the state which appoints in a discretionary manner; and there is no debate on this. The state appoints who she wants, and we realise that the people she appoints are not hard heads; they are not journalists who have independently proven themselves in the various media where they work. That is why I said the NCC is politically dependent; they only take decisions which are politically correct.

Another respondent equally said: The civil servants working there directly depend on the ministry of communication.

From all indications, respondents perceive the NCC as dependent. This dependency is enshrined in the 2012 decree reorganising the council. Consequently, they posit that they cannot trust such organ and refer to it as an independent media regulator.

The Composition of the Council

Many respondents felt that the composition of the council was a serious threat to its credibility. That is, the January 2012 decree reorganising the council was partly responsible of the crisis we are witnessing today. For them, the fact that members of the council are appointed by the government is making this institution look like another branch of the government. One respondent said:

Secondly, we do not know the criteria for appointment of NCC members. Although it is true that some of the members are experienced journalists who have proven themselves, there are also young journalists who barely have ten years in the profession. There are at least two young journalists in that Council who, each time they are interviewed, give lessons to others, and equally contribute to sanctioning media, journalists and publishing directors who have twenty, forty or even fifty years in the profession; and this is a problem. We cannot have in a commission youths who take part in decisions suspending journalists who have proven themselves. So, there is a problem with the composition of the NCC.

Another respondent asserted:

The NCC does any kind of things. Members of the council have been chosen by the state without asking journalists. And most of those members are contested because, in the profession, they are not considered as the best ones. We know the icons of our profession, people who speak and we listen. Can you imagine the last president of the council was a bishop and was appointed there because he has a degree in journalism? And so, did

that make him a journalist? Somebody who had never written an article and did not know the reality of the profession. He cannot say something, and journalists accept; may be as a priest yes, but as a member of the council no. It is the reason why members of the council are contested and even their decisions are contested. We do not contest the existence of the NCC, but we are instead contesting the operating system and the selection of its members.

One respondent also said: [...] the problem lies at the level of the composition of the organ in charge of regulation.

As can be seen from these statements, the membership of the council is another problem. Respondents are not rejecting the council itself but those who have been appointed there partly because (i) they feel that they are not the best of the profession; (ii) they were not chosen by journalists themselves and (iii) lastly some of them do not have the required experience they believe is necessary to administer sanctions. This situation brings us to another level of the structure of the council.

Government Interference

This was another major theme the findings revealed. In fact, some respondents observed that the government in one way or another was interfering in the council decisions. According to them, the relation the council has with the different organs of the government like the financial dependency of the council towards the Star Building, its technical hierarchy from the ministry of communication and lastly the appointment from Etoudi pave the way for government interference. One respondent echoed this situation by giving an example:

The proof is that ministers influence their [NCC] decisions and there are two cases which really took me aback these last years. Indeed, when the minister in charge of territorial administration and decentralisation, and the delegate general for national security called on the National Communication Council to deal with old cases where the press mentioned their names, the NCC behaved like a police officer and a prosecutor and systematically condemned these media. Such attitude is not reassuring as far as freedom of the press is concerned. Even if there are excesses, there are ways to play a regulatory role. The NCC is not independent in anything.

In line with this, one publisher whose newspaper has been expecting the council decision said:

I take the case of Le Messenger and Mutations. All of us were surprised by the fact they were summoned by the council on the demand of the Minister of Communication. The question is, is it the Minister who has to ask to the council to sanction newspapers? If the council judges that these newspapers have violated the deontology, the council should then decide itself to call them not the minister.

These examples illustrated how government can prompt the council to sanction newspapers. With the case of these newspapers mentioned above, the council did not summon the newspapers in question itself. This is a clear indication that it did not see a fault in those two reports whose authors cited their sources; but was indirectly compelled to sanction them.

Discussion

The study's primary objective was to document journalists' perception of the National Communication Council. The secondary objectives were to document reasons for the non-acceptance by journalists of the NCC mandate and identify elements that can make journalists to accept the NCC.

To address these two secondary objectives, in-depth interviews were carried out on the structure, statute, role and sanctions and the deliberate incentives which can be taken to foster the acceptance of the National Communication Council as media regulator in Cameroon.

To address the first secondary objective and the first research question, that is, ‘what are the reasons for the non-acceptance by journalists of the NCC?’, interviewees were asked to comment on what they thought were the factors impeding on the National Communication Council’s credibility. First and foremost, respondents made it clear that they were not against the existence of the National Communication Council, but that the problem was coming from the composition of the council. They did not have a problem with the idea of a media regulator as all of them acknowledged that it is necessary for each profession to have a regulator in charge of crosschecking the excesses of the corporation. According to them, the problem lies in the carrying out of the regulation.

The second research question of this study, which is ‘what form of regulation do journalists think can be acceptable?’, was addressed by asking interviewees to discuss on elements they thought could end the confidence crisis between journalists and the council.

It clearly emerged that all respondents preferred the self-regulation model to regulation by the state. They explained that journalists should be the ones regulating themselves in place of the state. According to them, journalists should be the one electing those they think can regulate them because they know among themselves who has the necessary skills and probity to evaluate them. According to most of the respondents, the regulatory body should be a court of peers. One of them declared: “As the Head of State once said: ‘politics to politicians and schools to students’, today we are saying: ‘the press to journalists’”. Some of the respondents posited that they could only tolerate the government as an observer or referee who will only intervene at their request to ensure that the law is respected, a sort of co-regulation. Government will be there to act in case of unprofessional practices of media threatening social cohesion.

It should be noted here that, though there is general agreement among respondents that self-regulation is the best form of media regulation for Cameroon, respondents equally explained that this self-regulation should not be dominated by the media themselves because before government decisions to regulate media they were unable to regulate themselves due to internal battle and conflicts of interest.

In a nutshell, one can say that findings conform to the theoretical framework in the sense that although respondents opted for self-regulation as the best form of regulation for Cameroon, they equally recognised that government should be there to intervene in case it observes deviant practices. Government will act in case media and media professionals fail to meet up with their social responsibility.

In this regard, unprofessional practices in the media have the penchant to defeat the virtues of accuracy, consistency, supportiveness, and the complete picture representation of the working of society and the social environment. The mass media is viewed as maintaining society with ripple effects of its roles in society being its terminal reward. So, according to McQuail (2005), the stability and maintenance of the society depends on media ability to respond to both individuals and institution’s needs.

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