

Understanding Cameroon Press Freedom According To African Media Barometer from 2008-2014

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand the trend of press freedom in Cameroon base on African Media Barometer from 2008 – 2014. Journalism is effective when the press is free and press freedom in Cameroon has been criticised by journalism practitioners. Hence there is need to examine how press freedom has evolved over time especially with the coming of the new media. This article thus examines trends across issues like; freedom of expression, the Cameroon media landscape, broadcasting regulation as well as media practice. In order to achieve this, secondary data analysis was done. Data was collected from the African Media Barometer as from 2008 to 2014 and analysed. Findings revealed that freedom of expression has been in an increase as from 2008 (44.4%) to 2014 (73.5%). Results further show that the professional standards in terms of media practice is in a decline as from 2011 to 2014. Standard principles of reporting such as accuracy and fairness, integrity are not respected. Working conditions of journalists are generally very poor across the years. To conclude, Cameroon press freedom is in progress as from 2008 but there exist irresponsible journalism practices which therefore recommends in house media control from editor in chiefs' and heads of newsroom.

Keywords: Press freedom; Cameroon; African media barometer; Journalism

Introduction

Understanding the extent of press freedom in Cameroon is a leeway to assessing the practice of journalism in the country. Since the media do not exist in a vacuum but within a social system, media control cannot be avoided but the level of control determines the level of press freedom. Many factors can constrain media owners, reporters, editors and journalists from functioning with utmost objectivity and ethical soundness [1]. More so, journalists may withhold facts due to an individual's right to privacy, injury to some or to safeguard national interest [1]. Moreover, journalists will continue to perceive journalism principles as grandiose philosophising if their salaries are not regular and healthy salary will attract to the profession individuals with sound qualification [2]. Furthermore, journalists, owners and managers should be kept abreast of the development in society and about international best practices through regular training [2] in order to improve professionalism to reduce control.

This paper seeks to understand the level of Cameroon's press freedom by reviewing the African Media Barometer From 2008-2014 in order to understand the trend of press freedom in Cameroon. The Cameroon media landscape has existed under two major regimes, one which was purely authoritarian (President Ahmadou Ahidjo, 1960 - 1982) and the other democratic (President Paul Biya 1982 - date). In the previous regime, the press suffered tremendously from harassment, pre and post publication censorship, seizure and banning of newspaper houses [3]. According to [4], the concept of press freedom abhors government control, censorship, interference, and under democratic regulations aimed at abridging the freedom of opinion, expression, and transmission of information or ideas through the mass media and other channels of communication. Under a democratic regime, it is recommended that the media is free and self-governing as well as provides the government with the information it needs in order to make decisions in the common interest sensitive to public sentiments, an arena for public discussion, and by acting as a watchdog against abuse of power in politics and other parts of society [5].

Cameroon is a signatory to many international, continental and

regional human rights treaties and agreements hence it is oblige to respects the terms set up since all such ratified agreements become national law following their publication, in line with the doctrine of incorporation by reference [6]. Hence as a member of all these organisations including: The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted in 1948); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (enacted by the UN in 1976); The Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press (adopted by the general assembly of UNESCO in 1991); The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (adopted 27 June 1981; Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa 2002; African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance 2007; African Charter on Broadcasting 2001), Cameroon is suppose to abide to the declarations on freedom of expression.

Furthermore, there are national laws which guarantee freedom of the press including the preamble of the 1996 constitution which guarantees freedom of expression-and of the press-as being among the basic freedoms guaranteed by the basic law. It states that: the freedom of communication, of expression, of the press, of assembly, of association, and of trade unionism, as well as the right to strike shall be guaranteed under conditions fixed by the law. Despite this general guarantee, journalists have regularly been subjected to torture, humiliation and threats from administrative authorities and from law and order officials [6]. Cameroon ranks poorly in Freedom House's Global Press Freedom Survey 2010, occupying 146th place out of a total 196 countries [7].

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The Press Freedom Index 2010 of Reporters without Borders lists Cameroon in 129th place out of 178 countries [8]. The substantive piece of legislation regulating the operation of the media in Cameroon is Law No. 90/52 of 19 December 1990, as amended by Law No. 96/04 of 4 January 1996 [9], on freedom of mass communication. Section 1 guarantees freedom of the press. Each press organ is bound by sections 13 to 14 of the law to submit two signed copies of each publication to the competent State Council, the SDO and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, not less than two hours prior to distribution to the public. The distributor of a foreign press organ must, according to section 23, submit two copies of each issue to the Ministry of External Relations, the Minister of Communication, and the Minister of Justice not less than 24 hours prior to its distribution.

Other decrees such as Section 41(1) of Decree No. 2000/287 of 12 October 2000 on the general rules and regulations of the public service stipulates that: All civil servants shall be bound to observe professional discretion in respect of all facts, information or documents of which they have knowledge in the performance or in the course of the performance of their duties. Apart from the cases expressly provided for by the regulations in force a civil servant may not be released from his/her obligation except by an express decision from the authority under whom (s)he works. The decree makes it an offence for a government official to release any document for whatever reason. Furthermore section 41(2) states that: Any unlawful possession or removal of service papers or documents shall be strictly forbidden. The same shall apply to the disclosure or copying thereof, except for service reasons and in the manner prescribed by regulations in force [10]. By understanding the state of the law, there is need to appreciate how press freedom has evolve over time in the Cameroon media landscape.

This study therefore seeks to address the following objectives:

1. Examine the trend of freedom of expression across time according to the AMB
2. To understand the trend of the Media landscape, including new media in terms diversity, independence and sustainability

3. To understand the trend of Broadcasting regulation in terms of transparency and independence

4. To appreciate the trend of media practice base on professionalism

Methodology

This paper made use of secondary sources of information gathering. This actually involved the collection and analysis of published material [11]. In this paper, data was collected from the African Media Barometer as from 2008 to 2011. Data was analysed considering the four sectors as stipulated by AMB including freedom of expression; diversity, independence and sustainability of the media landscape; broadcasting regulation and professionalism in media practice. The scores for each sector were assigned to a point-score of 1-5. According to [10,12,13], after a qualitative group discussion, each member of the panel attaches their score(1- 5) to each sub-indicator of a sector. Then, the sum of all individual scores is divided by the number of panel members to get the final score for the sub-indicator.

Results and Discussions

Section 1: Freedom of expression, including freedom of the media, effectively protected and promoted

Findings (Table 1) indicate that freedom of expression has been on an increase as from 2008 (44.4%) to 2014 (73.5%). However, some indicators were not measured in 2008 (1.3, 1.4, 1.8, 1.9, and 1.11) and in 2011 (1.3). This result eventually reveals that the Cameroon media was suppressed between 2008 (44.4%) to 2011 (47.2%) and only until 2014 (73.5%) that the Cameroon media has enjoyed press freedom. Notwithstanding, the feasible overwhelming freedom enjoyed in 2014 could be explained by the high freedom of digital platforms from state control 4.5 (8.2%)/2014 and such freedom may have implications on journalism practice. Also, most respondents believed that freedom of expression is guaranteed by law across the years (indicator No1). This is obvious in literature as Cameroon is a signatory to many organisations

No	Indicator	2008	2011	2014
1.1	Freedom of expression, including freedom of the Media, is guaranteed in the constitution and protected by other pieces of legislation	3.4 (30.6%)	5.0 (21.2%)	4.9 (12.3%)
1.2	The right to freedom of expression is practised and citizens, including journalists, are asserting their rights without fear	2.6 (23.4%)	2.7 (11.4%)	3.1 (7.7%)
1.3	There are no laws restricting freedom of expression such as excessive official secrets or libels acts, or laws that unreasonably interfere with the responsibilities of the media	n/a (0.0%)	n/a (0.0%)	3.3 (8.2%)
1.4	The government makes every effort to honour regional and international instruments on freedom of expression and freedom of the media	n/a (0.0%)	1.5 (6.4%)	3.9 (9.7%)
1.5	Print publications are not required to obtain permission to publish from state authorities	n/a (0.0%)	1.7 (7.2%)	5.0 (12.4%)
1.6	Confidential sources of information are protected by law and/or the courts	2.1 (18.9%)	1.4 (5.9%)	3.9 (9.7%)
1.7	Public information is easily accessible, guaranteed by law, to all citizens	1.3 (11.7%)	1.3 (5.9%)	2.1 (5.2%)
1.8	Websites, blogs and other digital platforms are not required to register with, or obtain permission, from state authorities	n/a (0.0%)	4.2 (17.8%)	4.5 (11.1%)
1.9	The state does not seek to block or filter internet content unless in accordance with laws that provide restrictions that serve a legitimate interest and are necessary in a democratic society. And which are applied by independent courts.	n/a (0.0%)	1.5 (6.4%)	4.1 (10.1%)
1.10	Civil society in general and media lobby groups actively advance the course of media freedom	1.7 (15.3%)	3.0 (12.7%)	2.7 (6.7%)
1.11	Media legislation evolves from meaningful consultations among state institutions, citizens and interest groups	n/a (0.0%)	1.3 (5.5%)	2.9 (7.2%)
	Total	11.1 (44.4%)	23.6 (47.2%)	40.4 (73.5%)

Table 1: Indicators measuring freedom of expression.

which strive for press freedom and freedom of expression (indicator 1.4). Trends across the years also demonstrate a lukewarm attitude by the civil society to advance the course of media freedom as well as the fact that the construction of media legislation sparingly involves key stakeholders like state institutions, citizens and other interest groups.

Sector 2: The Media landscape, including new media, is characterised by diversity, independence and sustainability

Findings (Table 2) reveal that media diversity, independence and sustainability are on the rise across the years (47.7%/2008, 55.8%/2011, 41.2%/2014). Surprisingly, citizens' access to domestic and international media sources is most restricted in 2014 (9.2%), the value reflects a drop compared to 2008 (28.1%) and 2011(14.7%). Furthermore, findings suggest that there is a decrease though below the normal in government control over the placement of advertisements as a means to meddle with editorial content (indicator No 2.12) and the advertisement market is not large enough to support an independent media (indicator No 2.13) as the strength of this indicator decreases across the years. Analysis also reveal that the Cameroon media cover the full spectrum of economic, cultural, political and local perspectives and conduct investigative stories (indicator No 2.9) which is evident from government support as the Cameroon government is striving to promote an economic, sustainable, independent and diverse media landscape which is in progress as of 2011 (7.2%) to 2014(8.0%). This indicator was not measured in 2008.

Sector 3: Broadcasting regulation is transparent and independent; the state broadcaster is transformed into a truly public broadcaster

Generally, across the years, the transparency and independence of broadcasting regulation is low and critically fluctuates across the years with 2014 experiencing the highest level of freedom. Findings (Table 3) further revealed an unsatisfactory results across the years on the

indicator related to the accountability of the state/public broadcasters' to the public through an independent board which is representative of society at large and selected in an independent, open and transparent manner (indictor No 3.4). Also, the indicator (No 3.3) that the body, which regulates broadcasting services and licenses, does so in the public interest and ensures fairness and a diversity of views broadly representing society at large is weak indicating a lack of editorial independence of the state/public broadcaster from political influence as prescribed by law and practiced to ensure balanced and fair news and current affairs programme (indicator No 3.5).

Sector 4: The media practice high levels of professional standard

Results (Table 4) show that the professional standards in terms of media practice is in a decline as from 2011(48.8%) to 2014 (48.5%). Standard principles of reporting such as accuracy and fairness, integrity are not respected (indicator No 4.1) and media practitioners have low integrity and are corrupt (indicator No 4.5). This could be explained by the poor working conditions and low salaries of journalists across the years (indicator No 4.3). Also, the lamenting state of media professionalism may be accounted for the point that media professionals do not follow voluntary codes of professional standards and moreover, these codes of conducts are sparingly enforced by independent/non statutory bodies that deal with complaints from the public (indicator No 4.2).

Conclusion

Freedom of media requires some form of financial independence which the Cameroon media has not enjoyed since the advertisement market is not large enough to support an independent media. Looking at this report, the media of Cameroon is averagely free and due to a low professional standard resulting from poor working conditions, poor salaries and lack of integrity on the part of media practitioners, some form of control is relevant in order to serve not only the public interest

No	Indicator	2008	2011	2014
2.1	A wide range of sources of information (print, broadcasting, internet, mobile phones) is accessible and affordable to citizens	2.6 (15.5%)	2.8 (2.6%)	3.8 (9.2%)
2.2	Citizen's access to domestic and international media sources is not restricted by state authorities	4.7 (28.1%)	4.5 (14.7%)	3.8 (9.2%)
2.3	The editorial independence of print media published by a public authority is protected adequately against undue political interference	1.6 (9.6%)	1.7 (5.5%)	2.5 (6.1%)
2.4	Transparency of ownership of media houses in print/broadcasting is guaranteed by law and enforced	n/a (0.0%)	n/a (0.0%)	3.4 (8.3%)
2.5	Adequate competition legislation/regulation seeks to prevent media concentration and monopolies	2.3 (13.8%)	4.5 (14.7%)	3.8 (9.2%)
2.6	Government promotes a diverse media landscape with economically sustainable and independent media outlets	n/a (0.0%)	2.2 (7.2%)	3.3 (8.0%)
2.7	All media fairly represent the voices of both women and men	n/a (0.0%)	1.6 (5.2%)	3.2 (7.8%)
2.8	All media fairly represent the voices of society and its minorities in its ethnic, linguistic, religious diversity	n/a (0.0%)	2.5 (8.1%)	3.3 (8.0%)
2.9	Media cover the full spectrum of economic, cultural, political and local perspectives and conduct investigative stories	2.2 (13.2%)	3.7 (12.1%)	3.5 (8.5%)
2.10	Private broadcasters deliver a minimum of quality public interest programmes	n/a (0.0%)	n/a (0.0%)	2.6 (6.3%)
2.11	The country has a coherent ICT policy and/or the government implements promotional measures, which aim to meet the information needs of all citizens, including marginalized communities	n/a (0.0%)	2.6 (8.5%)	3.4 (8.3%)
2.12	Government does not use its power over the placement of advertisements as a means to interfere with editorial content	1.5 (10.0%)	1.7 (9.4%)	2.2 (5.3%)
2.13	The advertising market is large enough to support a diversity of media outlets	1.8 (10.8%)	2.9 (9.4%)	2.4 (5.8%)
	Total	16.7 47.7%	30.7 55.8%	41.2 63.4%

Table 2: Indicators measuring the Cameroon media landscape in terms of diversity, independence and sustainability.

No	Indicator	2008	2011	2014
3.1	Broadcasting legislation has been passed and is implemented that provides for a conducive environment for public, commercial and community broadcasting	3.0 (51.7%)	4.0 (48.2%)	3.1 (16.6%)
3.2	Broadcasting is regulated by an independent body that is adequately protected by law against interference and whose board is not dominated by any particular political party and is appointed – in an open way – involving civil society and not dominated by any particular political party.	n/a (0.0%)	1.2 (14.5%)	2.0 (10.6%)
3.3	The body, which regulates broadcasting services and licenses, does so in the public interest and ensures fairness and a diversity of views broadly representing society at large	1.6 (27.6%)	1.1 (13.3%)	2.9 (15.5%)
3.4	The state/public broadcaster is accountable to the public through an independent board which is representative of society at large and selected in an independent, open and transparent manner	1.2 (20.7%)	1.0 (12.0%)	1.6 (8.6%)
3.5	The editorial independence of the state/public broadcaster from political influence is guaranteed by law and practiced to ensure balanced and fair news and current affairs programme	n/a	n/a	1.9 (10.2%)
3.6	The state/public broadcaster is adequately funded in a manner that protects it from political interference through its budget and from commercial pressure	n/a	1.0 (12.0%)	3.4 (18.2%)
3.7	The state/public broadcaster offers diverse programming formats for all interests including local content and quality public interest programmes	n/a	n/a	3.8 20.3%
	Total	5.8 38.7%	8.3 33.2%	18.7 53.4%

Table 3: Indicators measuring transparency and independence of broadcasting regulation.

No	Indicator	2008	2011	2014
4.1	The standard of reporting follows the basic principles of accuracy and fairness	1.7 (13.9%)	2.2 (11.1%)	2.3 (11.9%)
4.2	The media follow voluntary codes of professional standards, which are enforced by independent/non statutory bodies that deal with complaints from the public	1.9 (15.6%)	2.3 (11.6%)	1.9 (9.8%)
4.3	Salary levels and general working conditions, including safety, for journalists and other media practitioners and adequate	n/a (0.0%)	1.2 (6.0%)	1.8 (9.3%)
4.4	Journalists and other media practitioners are organised in trade unions and/or professional associations, which effectively represent their interests	3.2 (26.2%)	4.8 (24.1%)	2.8 (14.4%)
4.5	Journalists and media houses have integrity and are not corrupt	n/a (0.0%)	1.0 (5.0%)	2.1 (10.8%)
4.6	Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship in the private broadcasting and print media	1.8 (23.0%)	1.6 (8.4%)	2.3 (11.9%)
4.7	Media professionals have access to training facilities offering formal qualification programmes as well as opportunities to upgrade skills	3.6 (29.5%)	4.5 (22.6%)	2.7 (13.9%)
4.8	Equal opportunities regardless of race or ethnicity, social group, gender/sex, religion, disabilities and age are promoted in media houses	n/a (0.0%)	2.3 (11.7%)	3.5 (18.0%)
	Total	12.2 48.8%	19.9 49.8%	19.4 48.5%

Table 4: Indicators measuring professionalism in media practice.

but safeguard national goals. Furthermore, the body which regulates broadcasting services (the National Communication Council - NCC) is weak and dependent on government and professional codes of conducts are sparingly enforced by this body that deal with complaints from the public. For a free press to persist in Cameroon there is need for a financial, psychological, structural and independent viable media system.

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