

The Publishing Industry and the Reading Culture in Nigeria



Damian Ugwutikiri Opata

Let me start by commending the organisers of this very important event for inviting me to make a brief contribution on the crisis in the publishing industry and reading culture in Nigeria. The Anambra Book and Creativity Festival, a bold initiative of the organisers, is among other things, established as part of an ameliorative to this crisis. The inclusion of this topic for discussion in this seminar is sufficient indication that the organisers are very much worried about this crisis, so much so that they want to call attention to it. My prayer and wish is that this festival be helped by Government and well-meaning Nigerians so that it can be sustained on a long time basis. Big and sustainable ideas many a time start in very small ways.

The first issue to consider is whether there is a crisis in the publishing industry and reading culture in Nigeria. Undoubtedly, over the last several decades in Nigeria, many publishing houses have sprung up over the length and breadth of this country, and this so much so that the big players like Heinemann, University Publishers, Spectrum, university presses, etc., appear to have diminished in importance. In addition to the establishment of more publishing houses is the fact that current technology has made it possible for many writers to self-publish their writings. The rise of the Internet with associated access to different sorts of web pages, Facebook, and other social media has increased the tempo of publishing and posting of diverse forms of materials on the Internet. The crisis in the publishing industry, if there is, cannot therefore be that of a shortage of where to publish one's materials.

There is hardly any doubt that the increase in the number of available publishing outlets in Nigeria has also increased the number of those who read them. Most of the young people in Nigeria are glued to the social media, and many celebrities are emerging through their ownership and management of blogs. Many newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and all manner of religious literature are being published, disseminated, and read. Text messages contribute a lot to what people read on a daily basis in Nigeria. Then of course, there is Facebook and other social media where sensational issues are posted by groups and individuals for those interested. The amount of materials posted and read by Nigerians from home and abroad during the struggle against the removal of oil subsidy and consequent increase in the

pump price of petrol can only be imagined. Indeed, it was like a social movement. Added to the increase in the number of publishing outlets is the fact of the growing number of the school population who are mandatorily made to read books, articles, and mimeographed materials needed for different courses and subject in the school curriculum. This is again to say that if there is any crisis in the reading culture in Nigeria, it is not that of a decrease in the number of people who read. So, where is the crisis in the publishing industry and reading culture in Nigeria?

In my opinion, there is a worrying crisis in the publishing industry in Nigeria, a crisis that is tied with the uncontrolled increase in the number of publishing avenues. One would have called this crisis “the commercialisation of the publishing industry”, but then publishing is also a commercial activity. The name of the crisis may simply be termed ‘poor quality publications’. This is because many publishing outfits do not have any means of quality control. This in itself is due to lack of professionalism in much of the publishing industry in Nigeria. Many publishing outfits do not engage any editor at all, even on a part-time basis. As Datus C. Smith Jr. says:

The editorial department of a publishing house – whether that means a large staff of specialists of different kinds or only one corner of the mind of the publisher in a one-person firm – is the key to success or failure. The manuscript is the foundation on which everything else in book publishing is built. Unless there are ideas that will be interesting or useful to the public, and presented in ways that the public will accept, there is no point in book publishing at all. (*A Guide to Publishing*. Revised Edition. Lagos: University of Lagos Press, p. 41, 1990).

The evidence for lack of editorial input in many publications in Nigeria stares every critical reader on the face. Wrong spellings, incorrect grammar, confuse thinking, ill-organised ideas, dated materials, points supposed to be argued but thrust upon the reader unprocessed, etc., are evident everywhere in the pages of many published materials in Nigeria.

The disturbing thing here is that many publishers do not appear to be bothered by these deficiencies in the texts that issue from their publishing outfits. They are simply into “cash and carry” business. The authors and the readers are those who eventually suffer from these acts of unprofessionalism in the publishing industry. Implied in all this is the fact that authors who are minded to these deficiencies employ their own editors, but not many authors

can afford the services of professional editors. Many a time, and especially at the tertiary level of education, many authors do not care about these deficiencies so long as they are assured of a market, usually students in their classes who are forced to buy these poorly conceptualised and produced books. Because of the cash and carry mentality in the publishing industry, many people who are not supposed to be writers in any sense write because they have students they can force to buy the books. The author of a book is part of the publishing industry, and the existence of ill-equipped authors as well as those who cannot afford the cost of professional editing of their manuscripts, and who patronise publishing outfits without editors then constitute another aspect of crisis in the publishing industry in Nigeria.

This type of crisis in the publishing industry in Nigeria is fuelled by a hidden and insidious type of crisis, mainly in tertiary institutions. This is the desire and aspiration for quick promotions by many lecturers in these institutions. This is worse in the nation's universities where published research count a lot for those who want to be promoted. Indeed, it is the case that in the promotion of academics in the nation's universities, publications carry more weight than teaching expertise, especially as the lecturers approach professorship positions. Many lecturers begin writing books before ever they learn to develop sustained critical arguments in writing for journals and periodicals. Such books are hardly researched, and many are indeed copy, transform what has been copied, and publish. Many are not even deterred by the fear of plagiarism. This habit has even spread to young graduates. You find somebody serving out his National Youth Service year, and he or she comes along with a manuscript requesting you to do an Introduction or a Foreword for him or her, and you begin to wonder what the person's idea of a book is. It can be gainfully argued that this type of published has diminished the meaning of book publishing. Whatever is the case, it must be agreed that such authors are imitating the habit of their lecturers who write for quick gain, especially now that book launching has become a thriving business in Nigeria. The worst dimension of the crisis generated by this type of publishing is that many people have lost a sense of shame concerning quality.

One more crisis in the publishing industry in Nigeria is that publishers and authors lay greater emphasis on packaging than on quality. The sole reason is to make the cover pages very attractive, and thereby lure readers into buying such books. Many a time, both well designed book covers with good colour separation and high quality printing are used to mask and lure unsuspecting buyers. This largely succeeds because many Nigerians do not have the time to skim the contents of a book before they buy. When this

happens, the losers are the reading public, not just in terms of having paid for what they would not have ordinarily spent their money on, not only because even if they were looking for books with same subject matter, their purchase is not worth their money, but also they have contributed to the patronising of poor quality books, albeit unknowingly. One of the negative fallouts of the crisis in the publishing industry in Nigeria is that it inhibits individuals from patronising books published in Nigeria. This has very adverse effects on national development since it creates dependency on foreign books.

Regarding the reading culture in Nigeria, it has already been said that it too is faced with crisis. It is the crisis of poor reading culture. This is a direct result of the crisis in the publishing industry. Readers read what is available in the public domain. Moreover, there is the diminished sense of the importance of reading because of the influence of the TV. This is more particularly the case with children. And then, there is the influence of different social media which has already been mentioned, and which takes a lot of reading time off the young population in Nigeria. This all leads to a situation where good materials to peruse are not sufficient, and what is available and good competes with the TV and other social media. The effect on the population is adverse because the cultural literacy of the general population is thereby impeded. As it is, the crisis in the publishing industry and among the reading public needs immediate intervention, mainly through the setting up of quality control measures in the publishing industry.