

Media and Ethics: Journalism Ethics in Nigerian News Media

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Abstract:- Ethics in journalism is the symbols of morals that journalists are supposed to uphold. These consist of a commitment to revealing the truth objectivity without being subjective by self-interest; maintaining the privacy of sources and attributing what is said to the appropriate source. This paper focuses on examining journalism ethics in Nigerian news media, how Nigerian journalists report issues concerning different region; does Nigerian journalist abide by the Code of Ethics. The research examined how Nigerian journalists carry out their duties. The study used Critical Discourse Analyses (CDA) as methodology. The research begins with brief introduction, background of Nigeria, Nigerian media structure at a glance, discussing ethical concept as well as ethical theories. The research figures out that, Nigerian journalists in one way or the other violated code of ethics of the profession.

Keywords: *Journalism Ethics, Media, Journalists, News, Nigeria*

I. INTRODUCTION

Media are social institutions that expect to make a moral contribution to the society; therefore, there is need for the rules that will guide the journalism practice. Oso and Pate, (2011: 145) quoted Johnson saying media are potentially “great secular church” and a system of Evangelism for dispensing the darkness of ignorance, expelling error and establishing truth.” On the process of their duty journalists were criticized of been subjective and their role has been a topic of discussion. According to Briggs and Burke 2005 they said “journalists are not to be trusted” and they are “slandorous”. (Briggs and Burke, 2005). The reason behind this is that; the nature of ownership, the news media weather it is government owned media or private media, the employers are working under editorial control. Politicians who can afford to run a media house can dictate what goes into the pages of the newspaper (Dare, 2010: 2). Government owned media tries to protect the government interest where as private media protect the interest of owners, these leads to the violation of stipulated code of ethics. Like the saying goes ‘He who pays the piper dictates the tone’. This research will examine the practice of the profession of journalism in Nigerian news media. Journalism is the trade technique or profession of reporting news for the public by various means. James Glen Stovall says “journalists meet many challenges in gathering, processing and distributing the news...” (Stovall, 2005: 18). Journalists are facing serious challenges in the process of their duty. Journalists are watchdog or gatekeepers of the society because they decide what news is and they make much important decision about what society says to itself. Been the gatekeepers of the society the profession is guided by journalism code of ethics to ensure journalists are doing their job within the context. Ethics in journalism, is the code of morals that journalist are supposed to uphold. These include a commitment to revealing the truth objectivity without being influenced by self-interest; maintaining the secrecy of sources and attributing what is said to the appropriate source (Ike, 2005: 74). Media has become as necessary as food and clothing. It has played significant role in strengthening the society. Media is considered as “mirror” of the modern society, in fact, it is the media which shapes our lives. Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media, the ability to tell us what issues are important. McCombs and Shaw pointed out that; Agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. Two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: first, the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it. Second, media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972: 176). Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, he noted that: “The news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.”

The purpose of the media is to inform people about current, new affairs and to tell about the latest gossip and fashion. It tells about the people who are geographically divided. In other words, Media can contribute a lot to a society. It can change opinions because they have access to people and this gives it a lot of strength. This strength can either be used constructively by educating the people or it can be used destructively

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by misleading the innocent people, the most important use of media is to educate the people about the basic human rights. Media is a bridge between the governing bodies and general public. Considering this vital role of the media in the society, there is need for ethical issues. This research focus on ethical issues on Nigerian news media, before discussing the ethical issues and theories the research will give brief background about Nigeria as a nation and Nigerian media structure, the research also discusses about Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalist. The last portions of this paper dwell on finding, discussion as well as conclusion.

Nigeria: Profile

Nigeria, officially the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is a federal constitutional republic comprising thirty-six states and one Federal Capital Territory. The country is located in West Africa and shares land borders with the Republic of Benin in the west, Chad and Cameroon in the east, and Niger in the north. Its coast lies on the Gulf of Guinea, a part of the Atlantic Ocean, in the south. The capital city is Abuja. The three largest and most influential ethnic groups in Nigeria are the *Hausa*, *Igbo* and *Yoruba*. Most Nigerians speak more than one language. The country's official language is English, English is widely spoken, especially among educated people. Nigeria has six geo-political zones namely: north-west, north-central, north-east, south-south, south-east and south west. The largest religious group is Muslim, making up about 50 percent of the population. Christians account for about 40 percent, while the remaining 10 percent of the people follow traditional beliefs or some combination of the two major groups (Nigerian press: 2000).

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the eighth most populous country in the world with a population of over 150 million according to 2006 census, and in 2014 the Nigerian population according to World Bank is 160.8 million and the estimate population in 2014 is over 170million therefore making it the most populous black country in the world (World Bank report: 2014).

Nigerian Media Landscape

In Nigeria there are public (Government owned) and private media houses. Totally, there are 233 government-owned radio and TV stations in Nigeria. Government stations are either owned by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) or by the 36 state governments. NTA belongs to the Federal Government and was established in April 1, 1976 through the retroactive Decree. No. 24 of 1977 to provide public service television services throughout Nigeria while state stations are established by State laws (Maku, 2012). FRCN was established April 1, 1978 though Decree No. 8 of 1979 and state-owned radio stations in 36 states set-up by respective State laws. There are over 350 broadcast stations in Nigeria (public and private) as of August 2010 (Odufwa, 2011). Radio is the key source of information for many Nigerians not only because it is easily accessible both in the cities and the village, but also most of the programmes are in local languages. Apart from newspaper and magazine there are over two hundred daily and weekly newspapers and most of Nigerian magazine are printed monthly. According to Mediafact Radio recorded highest penetration with 82.9 percent in 2011, TV 80.6 percent, newspaper 25.7 percent (Mediafact: 2011). This shows the power of radio in Nigeria is above other medium. There are several regulatory body that regulates the affairs of news media in Nigeria among them are: National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) regulates broadcast media i.e. Radio and Television, Nigerian press Council (NPC) regulates journalism practice i.e. Newspaper and magazine while Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) regulates all media advertising.

II. METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze the meaning and violation of journalism ethics in Nigeria, the research proposes to use discourse analysis as research method. Teun van Dijk defined discourse analysis as an analytical research that "primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, 2001). As such, the central aim of discourse analysis is to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. The concept of discourse analysis has become vague, either meaning almost nothing, or being used with more precise, but rather different, meanings in different contexts. But, in many cases, underlying the word 'discourse' is the general idea that language is structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life, familiar examples being 'medical discourse' and 'political discourse'. 'Discourse analysis' is the analysis of these patterns (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 2-16).

III. JOURNALISM ETHICS

Ethics means morality or study of morality, ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct, often addressing disputes of moral mixture. In other word, Ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies human actions in terms of being right or wrong, licit or illicit (Pate, 2013).

According to Washington Ethical Society, ethics defines the elements essential to human well-being and proposes principles to be used as guidelines for generating an ethical culture. Ethics also refers to the specific values, standards, rules, and agreements people adopt for conducting their lives (WES, 2012). Linda Thornton (2012) defined ethics as fundamentally about acting beyond our own self-interests. Another definition says that ethics are rules of conduct or principles of morality that point us towards the right or best way to act in a situation (Dominick, 1998). Ethics may be seen as being concerned with that which holds society together or provide the stability and security essential to the living of human life (Brown, 2011: 9). Ethics is the analysis, evaluation and promotion of what constitutes correct conduct and virtuous character in light of the best available principles (Ward, 2013). The term 'ethics' comes from the Greek word 'ethos' which means 'character' or what a right-thinking person is or does in order to have a good character. It deals with choosing among the good or bad options that individual faces. It may see as being concerned with that which holds society or a profession together or provides stability and security essential to social or professional cohesion. It involves thinking about morality, moral problems and moral judgements. It deals with what obligation we owe or to responsibilities we have toward our brothers, and what we should do make the world better place than we find it (Black and Roberts, 2011: 2-5).

In line with the above mentioned definition of ethics, some key ideas were deducted to shade more light about the concept of ethics. These ideas are: values, rights, duties, rules, and morality. Starting with values, values is an important and lasting beliefs or ideals shared by the members of a culture about what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable. Values have major influence on a person's behaviour and attitude and serve as broad guidelines in all situations. Values has four influential sources; parents, peer groups, role models and societal institutions. Rights are conforming with or conformable to justice, law, or morality. Duties; are obligation to take specific actions. Rules; are guidelines upon which an individual acts and provide resolutions in the face of ethical dilemmas. Relationship; are connections of one individuals to another in a web of mutuality. While morality; is a beliefs or ideas about what is right and wrong and about how people should behave.

All these aspect – values, rights, duties, rules, relationship and morality has interconnection and when talking about ethics, these aspects are in front line.

IV. ETHICAL DILEMMA OF JOURNALISM

Ethical theory serves as the foundation for ethical solutions to the difficult situations people encounter in life. In fact, for centuries, philosophers have come up with theoretical ways of telling right from wrong and for giving guidelines about how to live and act ethically. There are different theories of ethics provided by different scholars. The most popular ones are provided by Merrill, almost all the ethical theories can be placed under two main categories i.e. pragmatic and humanistic.

Pragmatic ethics, Emphasis is on achieving success, on reaching a goal potentially, with relatively little concern for how that success is achieved. (Merrill, 2004: 19-20) consider this a Machiavellian but pragmatic morality in which end justified the means. The idea is that the job of journalist is to provide as truthful account as possible and that the end may justify the means. Humanistic ethics, Emphasis is on doing what's best for society. Humanistic ethics, which overwhelmingly dominate ethical theory, are more obviously unselfish. The goals of ethics here are virtue and social improvement rather than personal success. Merrill 1997 explains this category of ethics is focused on either self-improvement of the journalist or on a concern for others, particularly sources and audience. This can be categorizing into three phases – deontological, teleological and personalist ethics.

V. CODE OF ETHICS FOR NIGERIAN JOURNALISTS

A journalistic code of ethics refers to a set of principles of professional conduct that are adopted and guarded by journalists themselves (McQuail, 2005: 173). Nigerian journalists with approval of Nigerian Press Organization and Nigerian Press Council came up with new ethical code of journalism in 1996. The council claimed that the old code of ethics was deficient in many vital areas. The new code was adopted and ratified. The new codes are fifteen ranging from editorial independence to press freedom and responsibility. (NPO: 1996). The most important part of this code is an editorial independence; the code says decision concerning the content of news should be responsibility of professional journalist. Accuracy and fairness is also another important angle of the code. Public has a right to know. Factual accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence. A journalist should refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information. Where such information has been inadvertently published, prompt correction should be made. A journalist must hold the right of reply as a cardinal rule of practice. In the course of his duties, a journalist should strive to separate facts from conjecture and comment. Decency is in the front of Nigerian code of ethics, the code of ethics emphasizes that; journalist should dress and comport himself in a manner that conforms to public taste. A journalist should refrain from using offensive,

abusive, or vulgar language. A journalist should not present lurid details, either in words or picture, of violence, sexual acts, abhorrent or horrid scenes. In cases involved in personal grief or shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and discretion. Unless it is in the furtherance of the public's right to know, a journalist should generally avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime. Last but not the least, the code made clarification about discrimination; journalist should refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnic group, religion, sex, or to any physical or mental illness or handicap. The other sectors that the code looks into include: reward and gratification, violence, children and minors, public interest, plagiarism among others. Nigerian code of ethics was derived from international code even though there are some differences, but share most common element including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability as these apply to the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public. Some journalistic Codes of Ethics, notably the European ones, also include a concern with discriminatory references in news based on race, religion, sexual orientation and physical or mental disabilities. In nutshell, code of ethics for Nigerian journalists is more or less similar with the code in UK and the USA.

VI. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Sixty-three news stories were investigated from *Leadership* newspapers for the period of one month. Having highlighted the ethics and examined the Nigerian Journalist, the ethics are not totally obeyed by them. The issues have however been a concern based on the ethics meant to be followed by journalists in Nigeria. Discrimination is among the Nigerian code of ethics, but finding on this research revealed that Nigerian journalists neglected this code. When the issue concerning Northerner, the Southern newspapers report the issue in bad tone and exaggerated manner, same to Northern press if the issue concern southerner, the reason behind this is that; South is dominated by Christians while North is dominated by Muslims. This means that ethnicity and religion play a vital role in Nigerian press. A good example is that of letter from former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo to the immediate past president Jonathan Goodluck. The letter occupied front pages of Nigerian press in December 2013. The title reads: "*Obasanjo to Jonathan: Read My Lips before It Is Too Late*". This letter also violated the code of 'Public interest' the code says: "A journalist should strive to enhance national unity and public good" the letter creates tension among Nigerians because the former president pin point out that; the Goodluck Jonathan is planning to train the gang that can help him to win 2015 general election and fight against northern elites. Also in the reply of the letter published in *Leadership* of December 11, 2013, indecent language was used. The code of 'Decent' says: "A journalist should refrain from using offensive, abusive, or vulgar language". The title of reply from presidency reads: "You're A Malicious, Indecent Hypocrite, Presidency Tells Obasanjo". The question here is that; why *Leadership* choose to take this angle as their headline? Editorial Independence most of the times is subjected to negative ownership. Most media organizations in Nigeria are not being independent of their publications due to the fact that these media houses are privately owned by important personalities in the society or by Government. Dare pointed out that; politicians who can afford to run a media house can dictate what goes into the pages of the newspaper (Dare, 2010: 2). Ethics are important because they prescribe acceptable codes of professional behaviour. But in itself, an ethic code of conduct can of itself do nothing. The responsibility for serving the public rests squarely on individual reporters and their editors. According to (Akinfeleye, 2003: 63) the challenge facing journalists has less to do with the failure to abide by the ethics of the profession. The challenge is to do a good job of informing and educating the Nigeria public. To do this, journalist must commit themselves to two fundamental objectives. Firstly, we must be better informed than the public we seek to serve. An uninformed or a poorly-informed reporter is a dangerous creature let loose on the land. Secondly, we must sharpen our editorial judgement. Good editorial judgment is a function of both experience and broad-mindedness. The rush to publish has left a lot to be desired in our editorial judgement. We need to hasten slowly because what is published can never be unpublished. In the words of Risley (2001) when a journalist is confronted with ethical problems he or she should consider the following principles.

- When there are two extreme positions in a situation, he or she should seek the middle ground known by Aristotle as the "Golden mean".
- Act only as you would wish others would act.
- Consider the utilitarianism of our actions, that is, our action should produce the greatest balance of good over evil.
- Apply the veil of ignorance, that is, make ethical decisions as if you are equal with all members of the society and lastly treat people in the same way you would expect to be treated.

As the research revealed, Nigerian journalists violate journalism ethics, especially on editorial independence because of the ownership pattern. So also, Nigerian journalist engaged in discrimination violation, because of the complex nature of the country in terms of religion and multi- ethnicity.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study was meant to explore the Journalism ethics in Nigerian news media. discourse analysis was used as yardstick. Major finding of this research revealed that; Nigerian journalists are not obeyed the codes; journalists are expecting to be moral-crusaders but some time they are doing otherwise. As the research exposed the reason behind this, is the complex nature of the Nigerian state. Nigeria has over two hundred and fifty ethnic group and religions. Journalist from opposite part of the country opposed each other in their publications. According to Oso, the factors that can lead to unethical practices in Nigeria are: poor technical knowledge, conflict of interests, ownership pattern and control, pressure of the market, poor pay, weak professional regulation, and loose organizational policies and control (Oso, 2007: 150). These factors that lead to unethical in journalism field is not only experienced in Nigeria, the problem is similar in many third world countries. Ethics in the media is, at its essence, about duty. It comes with concepts of freedom and responsibility. It comprises a set of principles and rules determined by members of the profession, preferably in cooperation with public opinion, to allow most if not all of the media to perform a better service. Unethical conduct, immorality or negative values are devoid of ethical benchmarks. They are dangerous social evils. They can be damaging to the society, to the extent of leading to a failed state. And, like all forms of things that are wrong, the dangers are multifaceted and some of them concrete enough (Pate, 2013). In light with this, for any society that want to develop code of ethics need to be apply; media has a vital role to play on this. There is need for the other researchers to explore Nigerian code in broadcast media houses because it's the major source of information for Nigerians, not only exploring the problem but to provide possible solutions to salvage the situation.

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