
Perception of Media Ethics among Newspaper Journalists and Its Implication for Journalism Practice

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Abstract

This study examined the perception of media ethics among newspaper journalists and its implication for journalism practice. The purpose was to find out the level of journalist's understanding of media code of conduct, factors responsible for the breach of ethical code, its implication on the practice and likely solutions to the problem. The methodology employed was a statistical survey. A total of 170 journalists out of 295 were purposively selected from various print media outfits as a sample for the study. Six research questions were raised while a 38- item semi-structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument. Findings showed that the respondents understand the ethical codes and apply it in their professional duties, while some do not apply the codes faithfully. The result showed that the problem with the journalism practice in Nigeria is not strictly ethical but a combination of other problems which ethical compliances has the potential to solve. It was also revealed the ethical crisis in the media is a reflection of the society which is crawling with all manner of ethical maladies in all facets. Based on the findings, it was recommended that press organizations should ensure they play their roles actively and ensure compliance to the ethical codes. It was also recommended that individual journalists must recognize the enormous task placed on him/her by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and be responsible and responsive in all activities.

Keywords: *Perception, Media Ethics, Newspaper Journalists, Implication & Journalism Practice*

Introduction

The media are a social institution that must make a moral contribution to the society. This assertion forms the basis for the call for an ethically-based practice of journalism.

According to Johnson (1997), the media are a potentially “great secular church” and “a system of evangelism for dispelling the darkness of ignorance, expelling error and establishing truth.” One major way by which truth in its entire ramification can be passed along in any modern society is essentially through the media, and people would be virtuous and take the right courses of actions as long as they are fully informed.

Someone once said that “after ten years of observing government and other social institutions at work, if the world is to be saved from self destruction, it would be the journalists, in all their objectionable practices, who would do it.” Black Steele and Barney, (1999).

This and other such positions portray the media as social agents of dissemination of information by which people shape and mould their realities of life. Such is believed to be the influence of the media that they have been referred to as “agent of power” and every society ascribes certain duties, rights and responsibilities to the media. In addition, the media are also expected to operate within the context of a high sense of responsibility and morality.

Journalistic practice and ethics have become one of the dominating features of contemporary society. Journalists are our main source of information, education and

entertainment. They influence the climate of opinion a great deal, hence constitute an important institution in the society. Indeed, journalists are believed to have the potential to change the status of a society. Murphy (1997) sums it up by saying that:

For most of the people of the world, for most of the event of the world, what the media do transmit did not happen. To that extent the world and its inhabitants are what the news media say they are.

People have varied opinions and views about journalistic practices, its power and influence in the society. Early ideas about journalism profession suggested that they were extremely powerful in molding and shaping popular opinion. Journalists were seen as rather like “social syringes” that are capable of injecting new ideas and pattern of behavior into an unresisting and unyielding society. Castly (1993) observes “journalism, with its special information and communication resources is embedded in virtually every corner of social life, whether it be conflict, change, control or societal integration”.

Statement of the Problem

Many ethical considerations within journalistic practice have the potential to cause disagreement, because there is often a conflict between ethics in theory and what journalists face in the real world. Journalists often have to grapple with the difference between what philosopher say is right and the requirements of their job, when it comes to question of bias, conflicts of interest, accountability and truth telling.

Research Questions

1. How do journalists perceive/understand ethical issues/principle?
2. To what extent does journalistic practice comply with ethical codes?
3. To what extent do journalists agree with the level of compliance ethical issues?
4. In what ways has the public benefited from operations journalistic ethics?
5. What difficulties do journalist encounter applying ethical issues?
6. What implications will journalist’s perception on ethical issues have on their professional practices?

Objectives of the Study

This study will be appreciated in the field of media practice, ownership and control. Its significance stems from the facts that knowledge of the norms of journalist’s practices and ethics in Nigeria prepared journalists to handle news items with caution. The study de-emphasizes issues based on religious sentiments, political partisanship and monetary gratifications in journalistic practices.

Significance of the Study

This research investigation is aimed at checking all cases of unethical practices in journalistic practice.

Conflict areas between journalists and their employers such as financial and job insecurity, the question of allegiance, censorship will be highlighted and the outcome of this study hopefully will enhance journalistic practice.

This study will serve as a veritable instrument to fill the pulse of the people as well as a feedback mechanism through a well structured questionnaire.

This study is an original contribution in the field of journalistic practice and ethics in Nigeria and will add to the body of knowledge on the subject matter.

It will serve as a point of reference for research work in the field.

Operational Definition of Terms

- **Journalists:** Media practitioners in both print and electronic media, who gather, process, package and disseminate news to the public through established mass media.
- **Perception:** The way journalist's see issues at distinct from reality.
- **Ethics:** This is a concept concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behavior.

Literature Review

Journalism is an unwritten and unspoken covenant between its practitioners and the public. It is a public trust which should not be betrayed or abused. Journalism is a sacred responsibility which the practitioners discharge to the society to protect and promote socio-economic, cultural and political values which are not inimical to public good, morality and orderly development on sustainable basis. Christian (2001). Meyer (1987) notes:

Anything that is inconsistent to public interest, public good and public morality as define as perceived by right thinking members of society cannot be the object of journalistic practice to the extent of its antithesis to the good health of the public

Journalism as a product of its society simply reflects that society can be compromised by the same society. Merrill and Barney (1982) state that "modern journalists are increasingly pulled between what they consider their right as journalists and their responsibility to society or to various groups"

Noble and patriotic as the role of Nigeria press in the nation building is, the profession seems to be suffering from a credibility deficit. Adediji (2003). At the peak of the military era in Nigeria, Kukah (1996) lamented the credibility crisis prevalent in the Nigerian press. He notes:

There was a time when next to God, it is the press that legitimize what Nigerians considered to be truth in any given situation. Once people back up their claims with "I read it in the newspaper, if you doubt my claim, I still have a copy of the newspaper". And at the time, backing up one's claim with a publication in the newspaper settled any argument on the veracity of any claim. The same cannot be said of the Nigeria press today. The press is now having credibility problem. KUKah (1996).

In Nigeria, there are many ethical problems arising from the natural inclination to over-simplification and falsification in journalism and those which result from submitting to various public pressures that journalists must address themselves to on daily basis.

By merely reflecting social situations, journalist practice limit itself and risking the danger of falling into lethargy, which is capable of showing societal process as opposed to the objective of accelerating the process of growth and orderly development. Journalistic practice is more than a pedestrian acceptance of situations and reportage of such situations.

MacQuail (1987) says, "the basic problem of journalist practice have been ethical and also philosophical". In the past journalists thought very little about theories of ethics and knew almost nothing about the history of moral philosophy. The objects of study in ethics are theories bothering on human nature. This implies that the study of ethics involve the study of a lot of ethical theories. Some of these theories can help the journalists to determine the morality of their professional actions.

Theoretical Framework

Ethical theories or principle can be seen as ethical road maps that point at individual towards the right best way to act in a particular situation.

Okunna (1995) defines ethical theory as "a principle put forward to explain, describe,

prescribe or predict human ethical behavior". The theories are explanatory because "they give reasons why human beings take whatever moral decision and actions they arrived at in their dealings with fellow human beings.

Theological Theory

This story states that the result or consequences of action determine the rightness or wrongness. Hence, the end justifies the means is preached, which is a form of hedonistic philosophy.

Granrose (1974), notes that teleological theory holds that "we ought to do the actions or adopt the rule that will produce greatest possible balance of good over evil". A journalist that subscribes to this theory always weights the outcome of hisactions actions before taking decisions.

Ethics and Its Philosophical Background

Ethics is the parameter for assessing right and wrong. Most of scholars who have attempted to define ethics described it as a means of discerning right from wrong. Folarin (1999) says "Ethics, or moral philosophy, is an acquired habit of the human intellect which enable it's possessor to true conclusion about the rightness or wrongness of human actions as a means for attaining true happiness". Meyer (1987) defines ethics as "the branch of philosophy that deals with the issue of right or wrong in human affairs." It is socially generated signpost which directs our actions from wrong to right.

Ethical Journalistic Practice

Journalistic ethics is a relatively modern philosophy. The earliest the sign appear at the turn of the 20th century as a reaction against the excesses of the free press theory of the press should be completely free to publish what it likes. The abuse of this freedom has often given rise to negative journalistic practices.

Godwin and Smith (1999) observe that "the aim of ethics or moral philosophy in journalism is to maintain quality in the media; ethics is fundamental to journalist because the practice is based on a set of essentially ethical concepts; truth, objectivity, honesty, privacy, freedom. The role of journalism is to provide information for the enlightenment, education and entertainment of the people. This raises ethical questions on the quality of intelligence disseminated, manner of its acquisition and the object for which is used in the society.

Merill and Lowestein (1989) opine that journalistic ethics is primarily personal to individual journalists and must be internalized within the journalists for it to be meaningful. To Daramola, (1999), ethical behavior or lack of it by a journalist, is a reflection of his personal value system.

Kunczik (1988) as cited by Folarin (1999) states that immediate relevant part of the earliest international declarations is proclaimed as a standard of a professional conduct for journalists engaged in gathering, transmitting, disseminating and commenting on news information and in describing events:

- Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.
- In pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at times defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news and the right of fair comment and criticism.
- The journalist shall report only in accordance with facts of which he/she knows the origin.
- The journalist shall not suppress essential information or falsify documents.

- The journalist shall use only fair method to obtain news, photographs and documents.
- The journalist shall do the utmost to rectify any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate.
- The journalist shall observe professional secrecy regarding the source of information obtained in confidence.
- The journalist shall be aware of the danger of discrimination based on, among other things, race, sex language, religion, political or other opinions.
- The journalist shall regard as grave professional offence the following plagiarism, malicious representations; the acceptance of bribe in any form in consideration of either public publication or suppression.

Conflicting Interests That Influence Ethical Decision in Journalistic Practice in Nigeria

Journalists in Nigeria are confronted with a hydra-faced ethical dilemma. The most often mentioned and perhaps the most intractable face of this dilemma concerns the conflict between society's and the journalistic practice's ethical demand on one hand and official government requirements on the other, especially in a country in which the preponderance of the mass media are owned and controlled by government (Folarin, 1999). The Nigeria journalist is therefore objective in his presentation of news only to extent to which he is free of censorship from the state, media owner control, his profession or art, his conscience and society in general.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is the descriptive survey.

Wimmer and Dominick (2000) opines that "A descriptive survey attempts to picture or document current condition or attitude i.e. it gives a true picture and describes what exist at the moment". Osuala (2001) says "Descriptive survey research is the most frequently used to identify variables that exist in a given situation and to describe that relationship which exist between variables".

In a survey study the researcher selects samples from the population for the exploratory study to enable him discover relative incidence, distribution and interrelation of educational, sociological, psychological, political as well as economic variables.

Study Population

The population was made up of all registered newspaper journalists including correspondents in Oyo and Osun states. Informal contacts at the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) Ibadan gives the total number of registered Newspaper journalists as (200) while that of Osun is given as (95) making a total of two hundred and ninety five (295) journalists.

Sampling Technique and Sampling Size

A purposive sampling technique was used for this study. This technique was used because it deals with selection of respondents based on certain pre-determined qualities as in this study. The selection of the respondents for the study was based on the professional qualification and specialization of the respondents along broadcast or Newspaper journalism line.

The study sample is one hundred and seventy (170) Newspaper journalists in Oyo and Osun states most of whom are correspondents who represent newspaper organizations located across the country.

The sample was drawn from a total population of Two hundred and ninety five (295) registered newspaper journalists from the two states using Yard, (1960) formula.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was design to elicit responses from the respondents. It consists of series of statements to which respondent's responses were sought to gets facts and opinion from them in other to know the aggregate views on the subject matter.

Data Analysis/Presentation of Findings

Data gathered from the exercise of administering the questionnaire are recorded and analyzed using tables. This research method was chosen because of its suitability to the nature of this study as observed by many social scientists. The method of analysis is frequently distribution (Simple percentage).

Table 1: shows a summary of the respondents on their understanding of ethical issues in journalism.

Respondents comments	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	90	54.5%
Disagree	62	37.6%
Undecided	13	7.9%
Total	165	100%

Source: Field survey 2014

The result in the table above indicates that ninety (90) 54.5% of the respondents agreed that they understand ethical in journalism, sixty two (62) 37.6% respondents disagreed while thirteen (13)7.9% were undecided.

From the findings, a good number of journalists that is sixty two (62) 37.6% do not understand ethical issues in their profe

Table 2: summary of responses on whether journalistic ethics contain internal contradictions in actual application

Respondents comments	Frequency	Percentage of respondents
Agree	109	66.1%
Disagree	50	30.3%
Undecided	6	3.6%
Total	165	100%

Source: field survey 2014.

The table above shows that (109) 66.1% respondents agreed while those who did not agree were (50) 30.3%, 6 respondents representing 3.6% did not take any position. In any case, their position could go either way.

The result in this table implies that, there is often a conflict between journalistic ethics in theory and what journalists face in the real world. Journalist has to grapple with the difference between what journalistic ethics say and the requirements of their jobs when it comes to question of bias, conflicts of interest and accountability. This finding agreed with the assertion of Gordon and Kittors (1999) that journalistic ethics deal with voluntary, rather than required conduct.

Table 3: Responses by respondents on whether rules and norms to regulate journalist's behavior are adopted by journalist themselves.

Respondents comments	Rate of response	Percentage of response
Agree	121	73.3%
Disagree	38	23.1%
Undecided	6	3.6%
Total	165	100%

Source: field survey 2014

The table show that 121 journalist agreed which represent 73.3%, 38 disagreed representing 23.1% while 6, 3.6% of them did not indicate their position.

The result particularly from the response of most journalist is consistent with the rules and norms adopted in 1998 at the Ilorin convention by all stakeholders in journalistic practice-Nigeria Union of Journalist, Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria guild of would ever be filled. There is a word of difference between looking for the truth and expecting to find it. Looking for the truth requires impartiality, reporting requires acknowledging you have failed to find it. The instant a journalist decides that he or she has enough information to file a story; objectivity is out of the window. However, this does not mean that impartiality goes out of the window as well for that would mean the journalist abandoning the search for truth.

The research findings agrees with the assertions of Glasser (1992) in the literature reviewed that journalists generally rely on their sources for information, many of whom have agenda of their own. This implies that truth in journalistic practice is subjective.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents on if truth in journalism practice is a result of decision making process.

Respondents comments	Rate of response	Percentage of response
Agree	162	98.2%
Disagree	3	1.8%
Undecided	-	-
Total	165	100%

Source: Field survey 2014

The table above indicate that majority of the respondents 162 representing 98.2% were positive in their affirmation while insignificant number of 3 (1.8%) had contrary views.

The findings revealed the complexities in news reporting. Reporters have to decide on what they consider as the truth and editors/owners at times have to select what to publish in order to meet deadlines and circulation target. Journalists and editors have an obligation to be faithful with their public about the quality of information provided. However, this guarantee of quality information is not something that can be instantly provided. This confirms the views of Hartely (1982) and Glasser (1992) that the instant a journalist decides that he or she has enough information to file a story, truth telling is out of the window, in the editing process has begun and subjectively.

Table 5: Shows a summary of responses on whether loyalty to employers conflicts with journalistic duties

Respondents comments	Rate of response	Percentage of response
Agree	160	97.0%
Disagree	4	2.4%
Undecided	1	0.6%
Total	165	100%

Source: Field survey 2014

In the table above, one hundred and sixty (160) 97.0% respondents affirmed that loyalty to employers do conflict with journalists routine assignments. Four (4) 2.4% of the respondents had contrary views while only one (1) 0.6% did not take any position.

The researcher finds out that journalists feel a loyalty to the media organization that sign their paychecks. To many, this feeling goes beyond a simple fear of losing one's job. It is more a sense of fair play and a feeling of identity with greater organization that they are part of.

Table 6: Response on what could be done to make newspaper journalist more ethically complaint.

The respondents were asked ways to make journalist ethically complaint by making comment.

Respondents comments	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	150	90.9%
Disagree	10	6.6%
Undecided	5	3.4%
Total	165	100%

Source: Field survey 2014

One hundred and fifty (150) representing 90.9% of the respondents are of the view that proper education and continuous training is necessary to make journalist ethically complaint. Ten (10) that is 6.6% and five (5) that is 3.4% however believe that motivation and sanction for failure to comply with codes respectively will make the journalist ethically complaint.

This confirms the opinion of Jimi (2011) when he opined that the problem of ethics in media practice in Nigeria amounts to a clear call for committed in house cleaning and self-examination by journalist so that a growing case of professional responsibility can be imbibed through proper education constant training.

Apart from ethical issues, what are other major problems of newspaper journalism in Nigeria. Majority of the respondent's above 90% responded that poor salary and lack of motivation are the major challenges facing newspaper journalism in Nigeria.

The respondents also almost unanimously blame the non-compliance to ethical codes on lack of regulation and monitoring by regulatory bodies.

This confirmed the view of Oparaeke (2008) he reasoned that the problem of journalistic practice in Nigeria is not only ethical. But a combination of many factors which ethical itself aims at correcting as standard assessment. He emphasized that Nigerian journalist do not operate in a social and political vacuum, hence it is not immured to the societal ills.

Discussion of Findings

The study, which centre on the perception of media ethics among Newspaper

Journalists and its implication for journalism practice sought to ferret out information on the way newspapers journalist perceived media ethics and by extension find out the implications the way they perceived the professional code have on the practice. The study which has a total of six research questions uncovered that though majority of the sampled journalists have good understanding of the ethical codes 54.5% but a reasonable percentage 37.6% do not while 7.9% did not take any position. The implication of this is that the ethical codes has not been fully inculcated and internalized by the newspaper journalists.

Also the respondents are of the opinion that there is internal contradiction in the actual application of the code of ethics that is the codes appear more theoretical than been pragmatic and for the codes to be judiciously applied into the practice, it needs to be sufficiently practical. As 66.1% of the respondents believe that there are contradictions 3.6% undecided and 30.9% believe that there is no contradiction.

Though the respondents claim they do apply the codes in the performance of their responsibilities as they to a very large extent agreed that it is central to the practice, they however almost unanimously 90% of the respondents opined that the problem with newspaper journalism is more than ethical. They are of the view that factors such as poor remuneration (as uncovered in table 4) lack of on-the-job training and failure on the part of regulatory bodies to sanction erring journalists among others gang up as problems and limitations of effective newspaper journalisms in Nigeria.

Conclusion

From data collected and analyzed, respondents are of that the ethical code for journalists is imperative. Respondents are of the opinion that for the Press to perform its professional and constitutional duties effectively, the practitioners must adhere to the Ethical code of the profession. As the 'Watchdog of the Society' 'the Conscience of the Nation', the need for the Press to discharge its duties with utmost care, responsibility and responsiveness is crucial.

Majority of respondents lamented the flagrant breaching of some provisions of the code. They noted that for the Press to perform its fundamental roles of informing, educating and entertaining people efficiently and effectively, the practitioners should subject themselves to the dictates of self-drawn, self-imposed regulations as contained in the Code of Ethics of Nigerian Press.

Also from the responses of the respondents, it is clear that regulatory bodies need to buckle up and enforce the Code. Unless necessary mechanisms are put in place to motivate journalists to adhere to the code and sanctions are meted out to the defaulters, many practitioners would continue to flout the code of Ethics with impunity.

Recommendation

From the conclusion drawn from the study, there is still need to ensure adherence of the Press to the profession's ethical code. Though, Nigerian Press is believed to be relatively credible and performing its roles, there are rooms for improvement.

To therefore ensure an ethically-complaint press and safeguard its credibility, the followings are recommended:

1. Registration and issuance of professional cards to all practicing journalists in the country. This will assist in reducing the presence of quacks. Practicing card of any member found guilty of professional misconducts should be withdrawn. There should be regular revalidation of practicing card by the professional bodies.
2. Emphasis should be on pre-practicing training in journalism. The present trend where journalism Is an "all-corners affairs" should be discouraged. Also regular on-the-job-trainings, refresher courses and other intellectual/professional development

programmes should be put in place by the media organizations and regulatory bodies.

3. Adequate welfare provisions should be put in place to motivate journalist to give their best. Such welfare provisions include regular payment of salary, enhanced salary package, housing/car loans, leave bonus, retirement benefits, and regular promotion among others.
4. Sanctioning of erring journalists and black-listing of any journalist that remains incorrigibles. Also, ethical-complaint journalists should be rewarded and celebrated by the media houses and regulatory bodies. Names of complaint and non-complaint journalists should be publicized to serve as motivation or deterrent to others.

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