

An Appraisal on Ethical conduct of Journalists in Reporting Political Defections in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study appraised the ethical conduct of journalists in reporting political defections in Rivers State. The paper seeks to find out how the journalists in Rivers State have managed to stay afloat in the troubled political waters of political defections in Rivers State bearing in mind that most of the media houses are owned by the politicians who have defected to other political parties to continue their political sojourn. Also, the study considers the issue of their ethical conduct in the miasma of intervening variables on the line of duty. The main objective of the study is to critically examine whether the scripting of defection stories by journalists in Rivers State adhere to a high sense of moral responsibility and to investigate what factors influence the ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State. To achieve this, a survey design was adopted and a total of 40 respondents were drawn from the pool of registered journalists in Rivers State which comprises of Business day, Sun, Guardian, Punch, Authority, Newspapers and Rythm 93.7FM amongst others amongst others. Three questions which bordered on moral responsibility of journalists, adherence to ethical codes of the journalism profession and the factors contributory to the adherence to the ethical codes were posed. Data was gathered through the use of questionnaires and analysed using the weighted mean scores on a five point Likert Scale. The findings proved that the journalists were adhering to the professional ethics in their reportage of political defections and this was largely because of the effective supervision by the NUJ among others. It was recommended that the NUJ goes a step further in improving the work environment of journalists as a way of encouraging sustainability of such ethical conduct among other things.

Key Words: *Ethics, Professionalism, Political Defections, Reportage and Responsibility.*

Introduction

In recent times, there has been a wave of defections within the length and breadth of the political spectrum of Nigeria. This is because politicians are always in a hurry to latch on to the moving train that will satisfy their yearnings and aspirations to acquire political offices, favours and

appointments. Political analysts believe that this is a usual practice for politicians who are dissatisfied with the piloting of the affairs of their various political parties to defect to other contending parties of their choice in search of better understanding, a level playing field and full leadership that such parties offer, (Amadi, 2014).

From 1999, when the present democratic dispensation in Nigeria started, there has been a myriad of defections by politicians traceable to various reasons personal to them with only a few based on principle. The defection rate this time is said to be more intense compared to other times in the country's political history. Politicians mostly involved in the defection game are the national and state legislators, governors, local government council chairmen, councilors and other card carrying members of the political party who may feel irrelevant to the scheme of things within their immediate environment.

At present, there are two major contending political parties among the 61 registered political parties in Nigeria. The parties are the Peoples' Democratic Party, (PDP) and the All Progressives' Congress, (APC). This is particularly so because they are the political parties that has either held power at both the state and national levels or been very active as opposition party to the government in power.

According to Amadi (2014), in Nigeria, the ultimate pursuit of most politicians is how to make money and any political party that stands in their way of achieving that will be jettisoned. For instance, in 2013, 27 lawmakers of the Rivers State House of Assembly, out of the entire 32 that make up the chamber, all serving commissioners at the time, who were bonafide members of the Peoples' Democratic Party, PDP, defected to the All Progressives' Congress, APC, in concert with the Governor, His Excellency, Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi who was having irreconcilable differences with the President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the national leader of the PDP at the time. Also, 22 out of the 23 local government council executives and PDP chapters in Rivers State defected to the APC to show their solidarity to the governor. The only local government left out of the defection was Obio/Akpo Local Government Area chairman and his councilors who were at loggerheads with the governor following their suspension and subsequent dissolution of the council by the Rivers State Government in 2013 for alleged financial misappropriation.

The action of the then Rivers State Governor, Chibuike Amaechi, in dissolving Obio/Akpo Local Government Council in 2013 was not unconnected with the alliance of President Goodluck Jonathan with Barr. Nyesom Ezenwo Wike. Wike was the minister of state for education in Jonathan's cabinet and an indigene of Obio/Akpo local government area as a way of weakening him politically at the grassroots. Barr. Wike was primed by Jonathan to take over the party structures of the PDP in Rivers State in difference to the governor at the time.

The media is concomitant with happenings in a given society. This is because the media cannot be divorced from the society. The media represent and frame society daily in their reportage of events. It is through the various political intrigues in Nigeria are displayed. Some scholars have accused the media of partisanship in the reportage of political events while others blame the journalists as individuals for playing the devil's advocate by trying to satisfy their paymaster at the expense of

public trust and goodwill. Some go as far as using their personal idiosyncrasies as a basis for what the media should stand for.

As Amadi (2014) puts it:

“Every available indices show that the PDP and the APC have virtually the same ideology and links in all the six geo-political zones of the country. The movement to the APC according to social commentators is like pouring new wine into an old wine skin. Interestingly, the large crowd of members that defected to the new party may not have convincing reasons for their actions. Reasons therefore need to be adduced for any action or inaction that might instigate change in the polity” (p.109).

According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the media always takes on the colouration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Hallin & Mancini’s proposition had earlier been noted by Okon (2001), who argued that the media cannot operate in a vacuum but are subject to the socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-religious and linguistic configuration of society. This makes the media a focal point in any society because of its functions. McQuail (2010) sums it up this way:

“the key to the unusual character of the media institution is that its activities are inextricably both economic and political as well as being very dependent on continually changing technologies...the public character of the media derives mainly from the political function of the media in a democracy, but also from the fact that information, culture and ideas are considered as the collective property of all” (p. 218).

This work aim to see how the Rivers State media, particularly the print, frame stories on political defections in line with the ethical standards for journalists.

Statement of the Problem

The media has the sole responsibility of giving an account of daily events in the form of news and other programmes as is the case of electronic media. This means that every event is a story if the media considers it as worthwhile. But nothing is news until it is reported by the media. This places a degree of responsibility of judgmental influence on reporters on what becomes the content of the story. Several factors come to play in this regard. The cultural, religious, political, economic, social cum educational background of the reporter play a big role in determining how news is framed. Another factor is the gatekeepers at the point of publishing the story.

Political defection is not an ordinary story that comes out without undertones. Several intrigues go into the making of the story because several interests are considered, including the influence of such stories on the medium. This is because most of the media houses are owned by the politicians who have defected to other political parties to continue their political sojourn. An example is

Senator Orji Uzor Kalu of Abia state who after serving as Governor on the platform of the PDP for eight years, defected to Progressive Peoples' Alliance, PPA and most recently, to the APC where he just got elected to serve on the 9th senate of the federal republic of Nigeria. He owns the Daily Sun, Daily Telegraph and the Sporting Sun newspapers, all of which has a national outlook. Reporting his defection story especially by the media he owns, will certainly be influenced by the persona of the principal on the reporter and indeed the gatekeepers.

Such influence runs contrary to the ethical stipulations of the journalism profession which thrives on public trust. The press does not operate in a vacuum but are bound by the dynamics of society. The journalists are also members of the society and therefore affected by the dynamics of society. How the journalists in Rivers State have managed to stay afloat in the troubled political waters in Nigeria remains the reason for this study. The core issue here is their ethical conduct in the miasma of intervening variables on the line of duty.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. Find out whether the scripting of defection stories by journalists in Rivers State adhere to a high sense of moral responsibility.
2. Evaluate whether scripting of defection stories by journalists in Rivers State is informed by strict sense compliance to journalism ethics or a subtle attempt to ridicule politicians.
3. Investigate what factors influence the ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. Does the scripting of defection stories by journalists in Rivers State adhere to a high sense of moral responsibility?
2. Are defection stories by journalists in Rivers State informed by strict sense of compliance to journalism ethics or a subtle attempt to ridicule politicians?
3. What factors influence the ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Responsibility Theory of the Press.

Agenda-Setting theory

According to Okunna (2002), the media helps to “put pictures in our heads” (p.21). This explains the power of the mass media trying to set the agenda for the society and raise issues that is believed to be of public importance. The theory explains the effects of mass media on culture and society (Harry, 2014). It describes the powerful influence of the media in every sphere of life- the ability to state and define what issues are important in society. Lang & Lang (1966) did aver that “the

mass media force attention to certain issues... they are regularly presenting objects, suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, and for which they have feelings,” (p.468).

The earliest researches in media found that the media which journalism is an integral part may not have the capacity to tell people what to think but may make appreciable progress in telling them what to think about. In other words, the amount of media attention, given to an issue affects the level of importance the public attaches to an issue. The implication here is that once an issue captures people’s attention and becomes major public discourse in the media and among people, all things being equal, it will attract government, politicians, corporate organizations, non-state actors, religious organizations and the general public’s attention (Alikor, 2016, p.127).

According to Alikor (2016), agenda-setting theory proponents such as (Lippman, 1922; Childs and Reston, 1995; Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 1972; Maxwell & Shaw, 1976; Hieberth & Gibbon, 2006; Ndimele & Innocents, 2006) seem to agree that theory has the capacity to influence public opinion in favour or against an issue based on the importance the media place on the same issue. They also agree that agenda-setting function of the media tells us the public issues that are important in the society.

Ngoa (2006) argues that the Agenda-setting is a “theory in progress” (p.1). It can be stated that opinions, attitudes and behaviours of people may change or even be altered. This is not necessarily because the media have caused an issue to be elevated in importance to the public; but rather, people decide the level of attention to be given to the media, the message or the sources. It can be argued that, people manipulate the media content selectively for a plurality of individual needs and dispositions (Ngoa, 2006). Ngoa’s assertion is that the media rely on intervening variables from society to influence opinions, attitudes.

The Social Responsibility Theory

The theory was developed by Henry Luce in 1942 who was the publisher of Times Magazines through his funding of the Robert Maryland Hutchins Commission report in the year, 1947. The Social Responsibility theory of the press holds that they must remain free of government control, but in an exchange must serve the public responsibly (Baran, 2004). Baran, states that the assumption of this theory is a bridge between libertarian principles of freedom and the need for control of the media. It stipulates that freedom carries a concomitant obligation. In it, the press is to be responsible to the society by carrying out some essential functions of mass communication (Tsegyu and Asenah, 2014).

Nwabueze (2012) gives the following as basic tenets of the social responsibility theory:

1. The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust.
2. News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
3. The media should be free but self-regulated.

4. The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct and
5. Under some circumstances, the government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest.

To this end, the Agenda setting theory and the social responsibility theory shows that the media has the capacity to drive peace and development in the society, but such capacity is subject to the societal dictates at the time and relative freedom as is guaranteed by the constitution. The freedom of the press must be exercised with utmost sense of responsibility; a sense of responsibility that will engender peace and national development. After all the media have obligations to society; and media ownership is a public trust. (Nwabueze, 2012).

Conceptual Review

Ethics

According to Yalaju (2001), the term ethics is a relatively elastic word because what determines good or bad is relative to different societies. What makes for good in a particular society might be the root of evil in another society. The idea is discerning right and wrong, just and immoral is ethics. Ethics are moral principles, values that guide a person's behavior within a given society. Ethics are a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. Three areas of study of ethics as classified are; Meta-ethics, Normative ethics, and Applied ethics.

Meta-ethics studies it meaning of moral, language and moral facts in theory, seeking to know how values are determined. For example, is it practically impossible to have a secure knowledge of what is right and wrong because knowledge is constantly in a state of flux. Meta-ethics takes the form of question to know how we understand, know about and what we mean when we talk about what is right and wrong especially within a contextual framework.

Normative ethics studies ethical actions and examines standard for both right and wrong actions and questions arising from how one should act. Applied ethics makes ethical theory a real life situations, addressing practical questions like is violence against right or wrong? Is getting an abortion immoral? Should others be treated with civility? The essence is to apply some standards of behavior carrying out day to day activities. This is a yardstick for measuring excesses in behavior, actions of humans in a given environment. Ethics defines acceptable human behavior yet it is set by like minds. Ethics of journalism then are codes of morals that ensure that it will be practiced with subjectivity because of intentional or unintentional variables.

What one examines as moral may not be moral to the other because of cultural differences, family background, religion, world views, and absolute values. Ethics are like code of conduct set by journalists to govern its day-to-day operations and it must not be in variance with public morality since the media owes the public an obligation.

Media Code of Ethics

Media ethics are the subdivision of applied ethics of dealing with a specific ethical principles and standards of media generally, (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org>). The code of ethics in media was created by a suggestion from the 1947 Hutchins commission in the United States of America on the operations of the media. It was the findings of the Hutchins' commission that led to the social responsibility theory of the press. The commission recommended that press and indeed the operators of the press should be responsible to society since they enjoy the freedom and goodwill from the same society, and that they should be held accountable for their actions and inactions.

Some of the provisions as duties and responsibilities of the journalist include:

1. Editorial Independence: Decisions concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of the professional journalists.
2. Accuracy and Fairness in the reportage of daily events.
3. Violence: the press should not present or report acts of violence, armed robbers, terrorism, activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such acts in the eyes of the public.
4. National Interest: the press should enhance national unity, public good and national interest within the confines of its reportage.
5. Children and minors under the age of 16 involved in cases concerning sexual offences, crimes, rituals or witchcraft either as victims, witness or defendants should not be intensified by name or picture.
6. Reward and Gratification: the press should neither solicit nor accept bribe, gratification or patronage to suppress or publish information.
(ii) To demand payment for the publication of news is inimical to the notion of news as a fair, accurate, unbiased and factual report of an event.

Media ethics are understandings among journalists, personal beliefs, traditions of journalist and traditions of journalism that also constitute their ethical commitments. The practice of ethics is tied to the conscience of the practitioner. Udeze (2009), in distinguishing law from ethics, notes that law and ethics try to make people do the right thing but while law is socially determined and socially enforced by state agencies, ethics is socially determined but individually enforced. How well it can be enforced when it is by self-enforcement remains to be seen. These principles do not have all the answers to the ethical dilemma encountered in day to day activities of journalists. When this happens, it is left for practitioners to take decisions based on their personal convictions.

Every society is guided by certain laws that govern the conduct of its members. Media institutions are guided by rules, codes, laws, and regulated for standardized results. Udoakah (2001) notes that the media organisations are like citizens, are bound to be obedient to the laws of the land and such laws includes the laws of libel, sedition, obscenity and so on. Beyond this, reporters are expected to be alert and report on any breaches in the rule of law. That is, to report on situations where issues of public interest are or affecting individuals are not treated according to the laid down laws/rules in the country.

Yalaju (2001), reports that the press has the major task of installing democracy and ensure that the government is accountable to the people. With this, the press fosters development of society. For

the journalists, the ethics of the profession are standards of conduct expected of all members of the profession as principal obligation and duty of the body of journalists expects of her practitioners. It is these duties and obligations cherished by all journalists that have shaped the standing of the journalists in our society.

Journalists do their job with the use of language and Amadi (2006), notes that language is not a neutral instrument, it is biased in thousand ways; and those ways are of course determined any number of differing ideologies, knowledge, power systems and institutions. It is through bias that the matter of ethics crops up in a report.

In a research by Shoemaker and colleagues (Shoemaker, Martin, Eunyi, & Brenda, 2001; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), it was discovered that biases in news selection were as a result of a variety of factors:

- organization-level factors such as administrative characteristics, working procedures, and cost and time constraints;
- story-level factors such as the geographic proximity of the story, visual features (for television), the clarity (ready interpretability) of the story, and story types—disasters, economics, crime, etc.;
- extra organizational, or professional, factors such as journalistic values and norms, and views of ‘newsworthiness’.

Also, Devaney (2013) stated that, “individuals perceive bias in news content even when it is not there.” Research suggests that some distortions are perceived as deliberate while others are accidental. Wang (2003) defines bias as the systematic differential treatment of one candidate, one party, or one side of an issue over an extended period of time. Bias is the failure to treat all voices in the marketplace of ideas equally while, Yat (2007) states that news distortion may be valid occurrences that are in relation to circumstances that make the source of news information withhold some of the facts. This, points directly to the gate-keeper as the last point of call before the making of any news.

Other factors such as journalists’ political and unconscious ideologies, imbalance of information made available to journalists, omission of facts available to journalists, favours and accountability to their employers among others, lead to news distortion and ultimately adjudged media bias, (Allen, 2015; Beder, 2004; Fog, 1999; Yat, 2007).

Deadlines pressure journalists into writing hasty stories. Some stories that they have been asked to cover most times, are still under investigation. Editors even go ahead to allocate columns in tomorrow’s edition even before the reporter comes back with his story. The reporter knows that if he fails to meet his deadline it would automatically affects the newspaper’s production and jeopardizes his job. Also, he would be putting sub-editors under pressure as they would have to

consult with the managing editors to use the column for running another story. The story in question may probably not be well investigated. Hence, having its news distorted.

The mass media attract advertisers by discussing topics of relevance to the advertised products and avoid any criticism of the commercial products. The media owners influence the selection, shaping and framing of the news to attract advertisers thus determining their target audience and their editorial approach to attract that audience while ensuring a favourable political climate for their media and other business concerns (Beder, 2004; Fog, 1999). Media outlets edit material that is likely to offend advertisers, especially with their news stories. Prospective shows are often discussed with major advertisers and sponsors who review script treatments and suggest changes when necessary to suit the desires of their patron.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive survey. 40 respondents were purposively sampled in line with the research objectives out of a total of 450 registered journalists according to the record of the Secretariat of the Nigerian Union of Journalists in Rivers State. The criteria for selection were based on the nomenclature of the journalists as political correspondents of their various media houses comprises of Business day, Sun, Guardian, Punch, Authority, Newspapers and Rythm 93.7FM amongst others. The Federated Correspondents' Chapel of the NUJ in Rivers State was used as a bastion because of its membership make-up of all national media houses in Nigeria including the print and electronic media. The instrument for Data gathering was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed along psychographic and demographic variables. The reliability of the instrument was carried out using the Pearson product correlation commonly symbolized as r. The data was presented in frequency tables and charts while analysis was done using simple percentages and the Weighted mean scores.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Research Question 1

Does the scripting of defection stories by journalists adheres to a high sense of moral responsibility.

Table 1: Moral responsibility of journalists in scripting defection stories

S/N	Moral responsibility of Journalists in Scripting Political Defection Stories	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	DECISION
1	The scripting of defection stories by Journalists adheres to high sense of moral responsibility	28 (140)	6 (24)	3 (9)	2 (4)	1 (1)	4.45	Agreed

2	The scripting of defection stories by Journalists does not adhere to high sense of moral responsibility	5 (25)	5 (20)	10 (30)	10 (20)	10 (10)	2.62	Disagreed
3	Journalists in Rivers State are always swayed by gratifications	4 (20)	6 (24)	6 (18)	15 (30)	9 (9)	2.52	Disagreed

The table above shows that Journalists in Rivers State script political defection stories with a high sense of moral responsibility and are not easily swayed by gratifications by their news sources.

Research Question 2

Are defection stories by journalists compelled by a strict sense compliance to journalism ethics or a subtle attempt to ridicule politicians.

S/N	How Political Defection Stories Adhere to Journalism Ethics	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	DECISION
1	Stories on political defections in Rivers State are in compliance with journalism ethics	15 (75)	10 (40)	5 (15)	6 (12)	4 (4)	3.65	Agreed
2	The journalists put the interest of the society first before scripting such stories	16 (80)	12 (48)	5 (15)	7 (14)	-	3.92	Agreed
3	No Journalist has been reprimanded in Rivers State yet for ridiculing any politician with their report	13 (65)	15 (60)	4 (12)	4 (8)	4 (4)	5.72	Agreed

Table 2 shows that all the respondents endorsed as true, all the view that journalists in Rivers State put the interest of the public first in the process of carrying out their duty. They also concurred that

stories on political defection in Rivers State were in compliance with the code of ethics for the journalism profession. The respondents further adduced that by the record, no journalist had either been reported or reprimanded by the NUJ in support of their claim.

Research Question 3

What factors influence the ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State?

Table 3: Factors affecting ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State

S/N	Factors affecting ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State	SA	A	U	D	SD	WMS	DECISION
1	Welfare and remuneration package of journalists makes them ethically upright	6 (30)	9 (36)	3 (9)	12 (24)	10 (10)	2.5	Disagreed
2	Professional discipline by NUJ helps to check journalists' ethical conduct	10 (50)	11 (44)	8 (24)	6 (12)	5 (5)	3.37	Agreed
3	Journalists are self-motivated to adhere to ethics of the profession	4 (20)	6 (24)	8 (24)	10 (20)	12 (12)	2.5	Disagreed

Table 3 above shows that the enforcement of ethical standards by the professional body of journalists, the Nigerian Union of Journalists, is a major factor in checking the ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State. Respondents were averse to suggestions that the remuneration of the journalists by their employers was a factor contributory to ethical uprightness of journalists, neither were they of the view that journalists were self-motivated to be ethically upright.

Discussion of Findings

The first question raised by the researcher was as to whether the scripting of defection stories by journalists in Rivers State adheres to a high sense of moral responsibility. The respondents were in the affirmative, agreeing further that journalists in Rivers State were not always swayed by the gratifications from news sources but depend more on the established codes of professional ethics for the profession. This finding is agrees with Okon (2014), that journalists accord special attention to prominent news sources and that this attention finds expression in respectability and knowledge ability. In other words, these news sources are often seen as credible and respectable, because of

this, many journalists often go out of their way to accord these news sources the highest courtesy. According to Okon (2014), "...journalists sometimes edit news/interviews on their prominent news sources especially those that border on grammatical blunders and profanities in order not to bring them to public ridicule and disrepute.

The second question was as to whether scripting of defection stories by journalists is compelled by a strict sense compliance to journalism ethics or a subtle attempt to ridicule politicians. Data in this regard showed that journalists in the state were guided by the code of ethics as their compass for writing political stories. The data further show that there was no report of political infraction by journalists practicing in the state. This shows that the NUJ through its machinery has kept the journalists abreast of their duties and obligations to society. This results counters the findings of Uzochukwu, Ugwoke and Obi (2016), that the media has not lived up to the principles of social responsibility theory to avoid being sensational and prejudicial in their reports particularly in electoral processes. The trio however opined that the media was effective in the coverage of electoral campaigns.

The third query sought to know the factors contributory to the ethical conduct of journalists in Rivers State. The result pointed to the effective supervision by the NUJ through its disciplinary committee. This according to some of the respondents interviewed for clarifications, has yielded much result as the NUJ does this in collaboration with several agencies of both the government and non-governmental organisations. This finding is at variance with Tsegysu and Asemah (2014). The duo in their finding on the ethical conduct of media professional in Minna, Niger State, noted that the inability of the Nigerian Journalist to uphold the ethical principle of journalism profession is due to the difficult terrain they are subjected to work. They are usually faced with pressure both within and outside the media. They held that despite the challenges, the journalists still strive to perform their social responsibility to society but do not adhere strictly to the ethics of the profession.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying the fact that the media are the primary sources of national political information. The mass media play a big role in the electoral process and help to define and shape the democratic process. Uzochukwu et al (2016), contend that media coverage ought to reflect the national development needs of the country by giving prominence to political issues in a sustained manner. In doing so, the media will be fulfilling its role at setting the agenda for the country and shaping national discourse.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, therefore, these recommendations were put forward:

1. Journalists in Rivers State should be trained further on how to tackle bigger national issues besides the political fervor in Rivers state. This will broaden the horizon of their reportage within the national gates.

2. Media houses in Rivers State should be properly funded to do more in-depth reportage of political stories with a view to unraveling hidden issues that could benefit the state and country at large.
3. The NUJ should not stop at monitoring the journalists' ethical conduct but also ensure that the work environment of the journalists is such that can discourage unethical conduct in any guise. This they can do by stipulating minimum standards of operation for media houses.

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