

A DISCOURSE ON ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA SOCIOLOGY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study was geared towards extrapolating the position of ethics in the present day media practice in Nigeria granted the fact that every discipline has rules and regulations governing it. Media practice the world over is governed by rules and regulations otherwise known as code of ethics. This paper therefore set out to highlight the existing code of ethics, stressing its awareness level and compliance among practicing journalists in Nigeria. A careful observation revealed that though a code of ethics exist for the practice of journalism in the country, it is not legally binding as that of the legal, medical and engineering professions. The looseness and laxity in implementation of these ethical codes is responsible for the nonchalance and disregard to full or proper adherence by journalists. A number of factors were found to be responsible for acts of deviance by journalists. These include: undefined lines of qualification, security, ignorance of the code of ethics and monetary gratifications. Based on the foregoing, recommendations were made for a standard and explicit code of ethics with stringent reprimand procedures for defaulters. Also recommended is the provision of a binding qualification process that will include a two-step or more qualifying examination/training series like the other professions as well as annual conferences to review and harmonise national principles and practice.

KEY WORDS: Media sociology, professionalism, ethics, practicing journalists, technological advancements.

Introduction

Due to several recent advances that have direct implications for journalism practice, it is becoming upwardly burdensome to define and characterize the idea. The invention of new media in the twenty - first century, particularly the internet, has altered and redefined the scope and practice of journalism around the world.

In the Nigerian clime, practicing journalists encounter diverse ethical difficulties drawing a line between their ethical conduct as well as that of the teeming public they communicate with on a regular basis. Central in these difficulties is the current notion of citizen journalism which more or less qualifies everyone to front themselves as journalists. Virtually anyone can post any write up

online. Such persons without adequate professional knowledge or training are likely to deviate totally from the ethical code of conduct of the journalism profession. The average person who is bereft of the actual code of journalism practice will try to conceptualize what it should be. The fact remains that there is a code of conduct for professional journalism practice in Nigeria and the level of journalistic compliance among practicing journalists is what this work is set to ascertain.

Statement of the Problem

Society has some level of moral obligations and expectations which its members irrespective of class, age, profession, gender and others must abide. These expectations are applicable to every society around the globe. The media industry in Nigeria has a code of ethics that regulates its practice but preliminary examination of journalists practicing in the country, reveals that a handful of them are dealing outside the confines of the code of ethics.

This paper is hinged on establishing the need for journalists to know and constantly acquaint themselves with the code of ethics of the profession and to establish the need to effectively uphold its essence in the course of their practice.

Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on three communication theories: the Social Responsibility Theory, the Development Media Theory and the Absolutist Theory.

The social responsibility theory (SRT) was conceived and birthed as a clog in the wheel of Press Freedom in the United States of America. According to Tsegyu and Asemah (2014, p. 11), the Press had begun to practice outside the confines of their freedom as specified by the Libertarian Theory. As a result, the Hutchins Commission of 1947 on Press Freedom came up with a number of recommendations that not only sought to protect the freedom of the press but inculcate in the press, the need to maintain a certain level of moral standard and social responsibility as they perform their professional duties.

The SRT according to Baran (2004, p. 477) asserts that media must remain free of government control, but in exchange media must serve the public. This simply implies that press freedom is a necessity in the interest of society that must also be checked for a greater interest of the same society. This same freedom can rightly be transcribed as power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The Libertarian Theory as the name implies gave undue freedom to the press and the unpalatable consequence of their functional disposition toward the society gave rise to the social responsibility theory which according to Siebert et al. (1956) as cited by Folarin (1998:28) was hinged on the following:

- (i) Serving the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible.

- (ii) Informing the public about issues to enable it take self-determined actions.
- (iii) Protecting the rights of the individual by acting as watchdog over the government.
- (iv) Boosting the economic system through the medium of advertising.
- (v) Providing good entertainment as a means of escape or diversion from the stress of daily life.
- (vi) Preserving financial autonomy for the media in order to keep them from undue interests and influences.

This theory from the forgoing is apt as it places a demand of proper and responsible practice of the profession on practicing journalists in Nigeria and the world at large.

The Development Media Theory on the other hand sees the media as a veritable tool of national development. McQuail (1987) as cited in Folarin (1998) outlines the focus of the theory to be that:

- (i) The Media's development activities must align with national policy.
- (ii) The media is free as long as its Freedom aligns with the economic and development needs of the society.
- (iii) Media content must dovetail towards national culture and language(s) as most national developmental trends are culture and language based.
- (iv) The Media has to accord priority to its reportage of news and information from countries that are geographically, culturally or politically close to it even as the government reserves the right to control the excesses of the press through restrictions, denials and other measures.

The Absolutist Theory being the third theory, on which this work is hinged, postulates that all human conduct is guided by a moral principle. This principle is said to hold sway no matter where, when and how it is applied. It is referred to as an ethical code that is universally engaged. A good example is the issue of right and wrong. What is right in America is right in Nigeria. The same is applicable to what is wrong. In buttressing this, Merrill (1974) stated that ethical absolutist theory is typified by the universality/uniformity of codes and the fact that societal dynamics do not have significant effect or impact on them.

Fab-Ukozor (2004) as cited in Pepple and Acholonu (2018), posits that in the field of journalism, there is a general acceptance of the principle of absolute and universal ethics which guide practising journalists around the world.

The theories considered above mirror the media as being vital to the existence of every society. The obvious reason is that the core values of journalism practice which include balanced news reporting, fairness, objectivity, truthfulness among

others can only thrive where the media are socially responsible to the profession and to the society.

The Concept of Professionalism

Professionalism as clearly outlined by the Merriam Webster dictionary is the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person. Freidson (1994, p.169) cited in Evans, L. (2008) suggests that 'much of the debate about professionalism is clouded by unstated assumptions and inconsistent and incomplete usages.' While Fox (1992, p.2) cited in Evans, L. (2008) makes the rather obvious point: 'Professionalism means different things to different people. Without a language police, however, it is unlikely that the term professional(ism) will be used in only one concrete way. Similarly, Englund (1996, p. 75) cited in Evans, L. (2008) looks at the lack of conceptual clarity and consensus in relation to teaching as a profession'.

Hoyle (1975, p. 315), cited in Evans, L. (2008) explained professionalism as those strategies and rhetoric's employed by members of an occupation in seeking to improve status, salary and conditions'. Present renditions or consideration of professionalism tend to incorporate recognition of the transposition within the political arena of public sector professions. Hoyle's interpretation when considered within the parameters of locus control, is different from Ozga (1995, p. 35)'s concept that analyses professionalism as a form of occupational control of teachers. Her contention is that professionalism is best understood in context, and particularly in policy context. Critical analyses of professionalism do not stress the qualities inherent in an occupation but explore the value of the service offered by the members of that occupation to those in power.

Regardless of the kind of work or the industry in view, professionalism is a common factor to all. A professional worker will strive for high standards and progressive improvement. Employees with notable traits of responsibility, strong communication, team spirit and problem solving skills are employers delight. The present day labour market is highly competitive particularly in the Nigerian clime and more so in the journalism industry where the profession has gradually become an all comers affair where anyone who feels literate enough to put pen to paper, take video clips of any event and uploads same to the web or successfully plays master of ceremony role in an event, sees him/herself as a journalist. Professionalism is not in and of itself a single skill but on a broader perspective, a blend of skills such as communication, enthusiasm/attitude, networking, teamwork, and problem solving/critical thinking.

The Ethical Concept

Ethics as a concept looks at what is right or wrong in human conduct. It is a branch of Philosophy which studies moral principles. Hence, Ethics is also known

as Moral Philosophy. The words Ethics and Morality are used interchangeably by most people. However, there is a difference between Ethics and Morals. Simply put, Ethics is a component of morals and reasoning (ethics = morals + reasoning). Having an ethical viewpoint goes with some reasons. I mean, there has got to be a reason for the view point you hold on an issue. Ethics is Moral Philosophy, and Philosophy is all about reasoning. For example, you might feel that it is morally wrong to steal, but if you have an ethical viewpoint on it, it should be based on some sets of arguments and analysis about why it would be wrong to steal.

Morality is all about adhering to what is described by society or religion as right or wrong, while being ethical requires you figuring out what is right – by applying some principles and considering all the complexities involved. Being ethical in the journalism profession is about applying the principles, rules and regulations as stipulated for the profession plus personal moral values that give added guidance to the practicing journalists.

An instant that clearly illustrates this, is the mobile phone user and the technician who repairs the phone. The user just clicks and flips away until the phone develops a fault. The technician, who is grounded on the workings and the principles involved in maintaining the phone, is more concerned with those details.

Ethics as a study of morality aids understanding of those philosophies which guide us in determining what is right or wrong. Such determinants range from religion, law, society, individual, Knowledge to time and more.

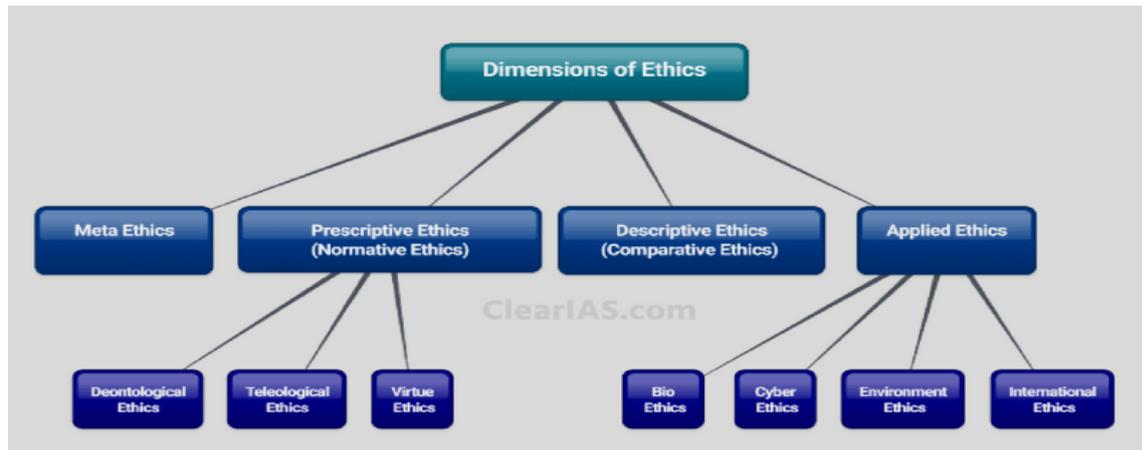
Consequences of Ethics

A consequence is the outcome or result of any act. A positive act done with proper reasoning (being ethical) has many positive consequences such as:

- Safeguarding the society.
- Feeling good.
- Creating credibility.
- Satisfying basic human needs etc.

However, being unethical has several negative consequences attached to it like loss of trust, nepotism, corruption, Crimes etc.

Dimensions of Ethics



Ethics is not just a theoretical science but has a lot of applications in the day to day life of people. Being multi-dimensional in nature, ethics is divided into four main branches which will only be mentioned for the purpose of this paper.

- (i) Meta-Ethics (Ethics about Ethics).
- (ii) Prescriptive Ethics (Normative Ethics).
- (iii) Descriptive Ethics (Comparative Ethics).
- (iv) Applied Ethics.

Nigerian Journalism and Professionalism

Worthy of note and uncommon knowledge to journalists is the fact that Nigerian Journalism came into existence much before the Nigerian nation. cursory observation of unfolded and unfolding events reveal that the practice of Journalism did not start on the right footing as such it did not receive proper guidance at inception by any law or regulations as is the case with other professions.

The simple reason is that there was none in place to define the requirements, composition and operations of the players in the industry. This is responsible for its initial dominance by participants from various disciplines. According to Agbaje (1992) “practitioners included the commercially frustrated local elites driven out of business by unfair competition from European monopolists, the unemployed, those sacked from jobs in ailing European firms and drop outs from other professions, and others.”

The foregoing indicates that the pioneers of journalism lacked the basic educational qualification as well as what it took to know or even rate their practice as a profession. The average practitioners then engaged in the profession either to make ends meet or to obtain a meal ticket. This perception continued, even, after the nations’ independence.

Records have it that students of the International Press Institute (IPI) in Lagos and the Director of the Institute, Tom Hopkins, in an interview during the opening ceremony of the centre by President Nnamidi Azikwe in 1964, stated

clearly to the director that they felt they were just being made to feel good about being Journalists as though they had an important career before them. Putting it to him, they asked: 'Don't you realize that all of us here are the throw-outs and outcasts from other jobs? Barton (1979, p. 25) cited in Adaja (2012).

Thus, by implication, the initial beneficiaries of formal education or training in the School of Journalism shared the same notion of Journalism not being a profession. This invariably affected general productivity as well as their disposition and self-worth in the face of colleagues in other professions.

The 20th century ushered in the first school of Journalism in 1908 at the University of Missouri in Columbia in the United States. Prior to this establishment, the Western world Journalists acquired their skills through on-the-job training. The great bequest from Joseph Pulitzer as expressed by Castro (2009) cited in Adaja (2012) led to the creation of a graduate school of Journalism at Columbia University, New York City in 1912.

Journalism in the developed world has been historically acclaimed to have commenced via the vehicle of apprenticeship – a system of learning the skills of a craft or trade from experts in the field by working with them for a period of time. This method went on in most of the developed nations till early 20th Century when formal Journalism Schools were established for the training of would-be Journalists.

Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists

Media practice in Nigeria is bound by laid down code of ethics as contained in the Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists, a document with fifteen outlined items or guidelines to aid a free and smooth practice of the journalism profession in the country. This code of ethics as outlined by the Nigeria Union of Journalists stipulates that Journalism entails a high degree of public trust.

To earn and maintain this trust, it is morally imperative for all journalists in the various news mediums to observe the highest professional and ethical standards while carrying out their duties. Journalists ought to always maintain a healthy regard for the public interest since truth is the anchor of journalism and every journalist must strive for the truth.

Conscious of the responsibilities and duties of journalists as purveyors of information, we, Nigerian journalist, give to ourselves this Code of Ethics. It is the duty of every journalist to observe its provisions.

1. EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

Decisions concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of a professional journalist.

2. ACCURACY AND FAIRNESS

- i. The 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.
- ii. 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.
- iii. In the course of his duties a journalist should strive to separate facts from conjecture and comment.

3. PRIVACY

As a general rule, a journalist should respect the privacy of individuals and their families unless it affects public interest.

- A. Information on the private life of an individual or his family should only be published if it impinges on public interest.
- B. Publishing of such information about an individual as mentioned above should be deemed justifiable only if it is directed at:
 - i. Exposing crime or serious misdemeanor;
 - ii. Exposing anti-social conduct;
 - iii. Protecting public health, morality and safety;
 - iv. Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of the individual concerned.

4. PRIVILEGE / NON-DISCLOSURE

- i. A journalist should observe the universally accepted principle of confidentiality and should not disclose the source of information obtained in confidence.
- ii. A journalist should not breach an agreement with a source of information obtained as "off- the-record" or as "back ground information.

5. DECENCY

- i. A journalist should dress and comport himself in a manner that conforms to public taste.
- ii. A journalist should refrain from using offensive, abusive or vulgar language.
- iii. A journalist should not present lurid details, either in words or picture, of violence, sexual acts, abhorrent or horrid scenes.
- iv. In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and discretion.

- v. 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.

6. DISCRIMINATION

A journalist should refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnic group, religion, sex or to any physical or mental illness or handicap.

7. REWARD AND GRATIFICATION

- i. A journalist 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.

8. VIOLENCE

A journalist should not present or report acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such acts in the eyes of the public.

9. CHILDREN AND MINORS

A Journalist should not identify, either by name or picture, or interview children under the age of 16 who are involved in cases concerning sexual offences, crimes and rituals or witchcraft either as victims, witnesses or defendants.

10. ACCESS TO INFORMATION

A journalist should strive to employ open and honest means in the gathering of information. Exceptional methods may be employed only when the public interest is at stake.

11. PUBLIC INTEREST

A journalist should strive to enhance national unity and public good.

12. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

A journalist should promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace and international understanding.

13. PLAGIARISM

A journalist should not copy, wholesale or in part, other people's work without attribution and/or consent.

14. COPYRIGHT

- i. Where a journalist reproduces a work, be it in print, broadcast, art work or design, proper acknowledgement should be accorded the author(s).
- ii. A journalist should abide by all rules of copyright, established by national and international laws and conventions.

15. PRESS FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

A journalist should strive at all-times to enhance press freedom and responsibility.

The Level of Journalists Compliance to Ethical Codes in Nigeria

and embarrassment to the government.

The owner or Publisher in the bid to protect his business and his relationship with the government had to terminate their jobs. This act on its own contravenes the ethical code of the profession. Another factor is the absence of standard remuneration for journalists like their counterparts in the law and medical professions who have a base in the civil service and are paid monthly salaries for those enrolled in such service.

This also provides room for agitations of wage increase and so on which the journalists cannot have access to. This is the major reason among others, for their irresistibility of brown envelopes (monetary gratification). The other scenario is where journalists are employed and sent out to scout for news. In this case the organisations identity serves as a meal ticket to the journalist.

Stipends gotten from covering events represent salaries to this group of journalists. The question is why won't journalists subjected to this level of treatment in a society such as ours; indulge in shady deals and offers that contravene the ethical code of professional conduct? For crying out loud, these are family men and women who would do anything to put food on the table for their families.

Another factor is lack of requisite knowledge of the content of the ethical code of conduct. A majority of journalists in the country work contrary to the dictates of the code of ethics. Reason is that they have not seen let alone know the content of the existing ethical code. Ignorance according to our learned colleagues is not an excuse because the far reaching implications and dare consequences of ignorance can jeopardise a person, profession and a nation.

It is therefore incumbent on the NUJ to fashion out ways through organising programmes and annual conferences to train and retrain members on the need to access, know and practise the profession strictly on the dictates of the ethical code and the implications of noncompliance.

Issues and Constraints of Journalism Practice in Nigeria

Fears and verifiable doubts have been expressed as to the validity of the notion that Nigerian media is a profession. According to Nnameka et al. (1989) a profession that doubles as a trade union can possibly not be a reputable one. The fact that there exists a Code of Conduct for the Nigerian Union of Journalists in

which Article I (i) referred to the Union as a professional body as well as a trade union is unbelievable and laughable because core professions like the NBA, NMA and others as we know them are not so identified or addressed.

Another issue is the non existence of documented guidelines, for qualification and eligibility for the members of the profession. Such guidelines will necessitate some form of rules and regulations as well as a body set up to implement them. The presence of such a body will definitely instil a level of conformity in members. At least an instant exist as we can see in Britain with the setting up of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ).

In ensuring that practitioners had a minimum standard of practice, a qualifying examination in form of a proficiency test was instituted as a measure of control and career advancement. Boyd – Barret (1980) elucidated the purpose of the proficiency test to include a proof that training has been completed and eligibility to being awarded the certificate of advancement with salary benefits law, public administration and shorthand before admitting such candidates for the proficiency test. Although, emphasis was placed on apprenticeship fashioned to last for 30 months (two and half years); the on- the- job-training was designed to lead to some visible goals in form of passing an examination. These measures were put in place to regulate the practice of journalism. Nnameka (1989) notes that in the case of journalism, the Nigerian Union of Journalists provides for 12 months of tutelage without writing qualifying examinations. Oso (2012) opined that the Journalist is not given the autonomy the practice of his trade deserves and as such, compromise is made on professional judgement.

Resolution

Factors such as individual, organizational, environmental and societal challenges are responsible for low level of credibility of the journalism profession in Nigeria. Key norms and values of the profession have been abused, violated and debased. Highly advocated by Zandberg and Neiger (2005) is a return to the revered values of truthfulness, neutrality and impartiality which may return the profession to its lost glory...citing a survey done among Israeli Journalists in 2003 by Tsfaty and Libio, (2003), “almost 90 percent of them (journalists) declared that verification of the truth is the most important value of the profession alongside the values of neutrality and of objectivity”.

To earn respect, recognition, and credibility for the Nigerian Journalism profession, truthfulness must be held sacred, while neutrality and objectivity should become sacrosanct. As a profession, the code of conduct should be revisited and reworked to state clearly the prerequisite qualifications necessary or required of a profession especially as it relates to the contemporary demands of the profession. Although, there exist in Nigeria, today, a number of institutes,

colleges/schools, polytechnics and universities offering Journalism or Mass Communication.

These schools should do more than just teach journalism, and do critical analysis. According to Tabuwe and Tangjong (2010) cited in Adaja (2012) "Journalism education should do more than teaching students how to write, it should teach them to think, to verify, to acclaim, to criticize and to synthesize". Again, the gap between school curricula and journalism practice needs to be bridged. According to Chibita (2010) cited in Adaja (2012), a study in which people were asked the most critical gaps between Journalism Curricula and practice, had "top on the list investigative and analytical skills, language proficiency (particularly English), writing skills, computing skills, and lack of depth in cognate areas such as political science, economics, sociology and literature".

Conclusion

In the words of Adaja (2011) "... a redefinition of the Nigerian media interest, mission and vision, unconditionally shared and subscribed to by all its members, must as a matter of urgency, be carried out." Also, "conscious and conscientious efforts must be made to professionalize journalism in Nigeria by adhering to the basic tenets and characteristics required of a profession," (Adaja, 2011, p. 200). The code of conduct in view should be upgraded to incorporate standardised entry/membership requirements and a detailed outline of disciplinary measures to adequately address defaulters. A careful incorporation of these components will reposition the Nigerian journalists to measure up to their contemporaries the world over.

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