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Journalism ethics: the dilemma, social and contextual constraints

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ABSTRACT

Journalism, with its claim to professionalism, is guided in its practice by ethical codes which prescribe what is considered 'good work'. This theoretical article argues that, though based on certain universal prescriptions, ethics is socially and culturally situated. The observance of the codes is socially determined based on the prevailing moral and political conditions. It is also argued that the issue of the type and quality of representations available in the media should also be of concern when we discuss ethics. The article discusses some of the social constraints to the observance of ethics within the Nigerian context and argues for the need to pay greater attention to addressing the material and economic barriers to media access and representation.

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Introduction

Almost all citizens and governments have interest in the performance of professionals in the communication industry. This interest stems from the fact that these professionals provide information and knowledge which the citizens need to be so regarded particularly in the political realm. Even as they are increasingly being turned into mere consumers in a marketized and corporatized neo-liberal world, people want what they regard as the 'truth' in advertising, public relations, and journalism. The search and demand for the truth remains a cardinal enterprise, especially in journalism which prides itself as a truth-seeking enterprise, for both the practitioners and the general public. There is a general assumption that journalism is the soul of democracy. A healthy and functioning democracy needs a credible, free, and independent media system that will provide the citizens the type of information they require to be active participants in the democratic process.

Concern for ethics, at least as related to the issues of 'imperative truth' based on 'matters of the fact' has always been an aspect of journalism practice from the advent of its beginning 'despite the primitive nature of their news gathering, and the partisan nature of the times' (Ward, 2009, p. 297). The second period in the development of ethics was the creation of 'public ethics' during the enlightenment period when journalists saw themselves as the 'tribunes of the public' (Ward, 2009). According to Ward's account, public ethics led to the 'idea of a Fourth Estate—the press as one of the governing institutions of society'. It was this idea of the press as a Fourth Estate of the Realm that led to the development of the libertarian theory during the 19th century.

The perceived and actual failure of the professionals in journalism to satisfy public expectations has led not only to public criticisms but also the search for new paradigms of practice (McCoy, 2004). Thus, in journalism, there was the movement from libertarianism as the guiding normative theory to social responsibility theory, and in the Third World to developmental journalism (McQuail, 1983; Siebert et al., 1956). Now, there is the movement toward what some have called civic/public/citizen journalism, alternative journalism, among others.

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The main concern under libertarian theory is the independence of the media from the state. The theorists advocated a free-marketplace of ideas under private control. But it was later found that private media owners were abusing their power and privilege. As Hallin puts it, 'market-place in ideas is different from the logic of the literal market of economic exchange' (Hallin, 1994, p. 2). Apart from the fact that the interests of media did not necessarily represent the public interest, 'it was clear that what worked to sell cultural commodities didn't necessarily coincide with the interest of society in substantial and accurate reporting on public affairs' (Hallin, pp. 3-4). In fact, Habermas (1991) in his theory of the public sphere, argues that the market was detrimental to the role of the media. The market through advertising and public relations led to what he calls the 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere.

Historically, according to Siebert et al. (1956), the failure of the press under the libertarian theory led to the social responsibility theory of the press. In America, the excesses of the then penny press led to the setting up of the Hutchins Commission in 1947. Reflecting on the journalism of the period, Wilkins and Brennen have argued that the 1920s and 1930s was a period of social conflict with many newspapers emphasizing entertainment, sex, and crime. They further show that 'Known as the time of 'Jazz Journalism', during this era, half-sized newspapers called tabloids that focused on human sentiment, sports, and sensationalism, became extremely popular' (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004, p. 299). The report of the Commission gave birth to the social responsibility theory of the press. Two key developments that came with the theory of social responsibility are the professionalization of journalism, and the accompanying ethical principles.

Many people will argue that the basis of good journalism practice is adherence to the ethical codes of the profession. Ethics and professionalism are two sides of the same coin. Journalism ethics is what Hippocratic Oath is to medical practice. However problematic this idea is, many of us hold tenacious to it. It is taken as a categorical imperative. As Omojola (2014) has rightly argued, there is a few (if any) arguments against the need for a functional ethical guide for journalism practice. Bob Steele has also spoken in the same vein when he observed that 'It remains imperative for those who practice journalism to strive for excellence and aspire to high ethical standard, regardless of systemic structural changes in media, increasingly fickle and cynical news consumers, and sharp scrutiny from a wide range of critics' (Steele, 2014, p. vii). This paper is a theoretical analysis examining why this belief is so strong and why it is problematic. First, we examine what we mean by ethics; offering some historical analysis of different ethical theories and principles in journalism, and how they relate to media practice in Nigeria.

Media ethics

Ethics refers to 'the personal values which underpin the behaviour and moral choices made by an individual in response to a specific situation' (McCoy, 2004, p. 106). Ethics concerns moral beliefs about what is right or wrong. It is 'a professional statement of what constitutes good work' (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004, p. 297).

Ethics is a moral philosophy, concerned with duty and obligations, either to oneself or to others. It is about values and standard of behaviour, and determinant of social actions. An American scholar, John Merrill says:

Ethics is that branch of philosophy that helps journalists determine what is right to do in their journalism; it is very much a normative science of conduct, with conduct considered primarily as self-determined, voluntary conduct. Ethics has to do with 'self-regulation' and 'self-enforcement' ...Ethics should provide the journalist certain basic principles or standards by which he can judge actions to be right or wrong, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible (Merrill, 1974).

Another scholar defines ethics as 'practical normative activity that aims to solve problems, integrate values and help humans live rightly, as individuals and societies' (Ward, 2009, p. 295). Ward adds that it 'is the analysis, evaluation and promotion of what constitute correct conduct and virtuous character in the light of the best available principles' (p. 295).

Ethics is different from laws that guide the profession. While ethics is personally determined and enforced, law is socially determined and enforced. What is legal may not be ethical. Adherence to ethics

is voluntary, though professional organisations try to enforce it. Unlike the law, the state does not get involved in either its promulgation or enforcement. A concern for ethics provides journalists a foundation on which to base their news judgment and other editorial behaviour. As noted by Merrill (1974), it is an indication of an attitude embracing both freedom and responsibility; enabling the journalist to weigh the consequences of their actions; promoting commitments to thoughtful decision-making among alternatives; and leading him/her to seek the *summum bonum*, the highest good in journalism, thus heightening the legitimacy of the individual and the journalist within. Ward (2009) says journalism ethics is a form of 'applied ethics that examines what journalists and news organisations should do, given their role in society' (p. 295). It must also be noted that the functions and roles of the mass media are, to a large extent, reflected in the ethics of the media. In this sense, while an ethical concern forces the journalist to consider their responsibility to the society, the media organization is also responsible to a broad range of publics and their interests (Pratt, 1988). Framed, according to Wilkins & Brennen (2004) from a social responsibility perspective, journalism ethics 'maintains the public's welfare that is a fundamental concern of daily journalism' (p. 299).

The clamour for some form of self-regulation in the practice of journalism arose with the development of professional consciousness among journalists in Europe after the First World War. What started as the struggle for better condition of work and pay later led to issues of 'professional status, training, recruitment and responsibility in society' (Jones, 1980, p. 10). In a 1928 report on 'Conditions of Work and Life of Journalists', the International Labour Organization (ILO) *inter alia* said: 'The establishment of exclusive professional courts to deal with professional conduct and conditions which journalists are almost unanimous in desiring, would not be fraught with great difficulty (Jones, 1980, p. 10).

As Clement Jones has observed, the ILO Report provided the first constructive thoughts about professional ethics. Since then, codes of ethics have developed both in scope and content. For instance, the early attempt was essentially to protect the journalists from unreasonable demands from their employers and enhance their professional status. Now-a-days, other protective purposes, particularly of guarding the public interest, have emerged (Jones, 1980).

Inherent in ethics is the notion of responsibility. The idea is that if so much power is granted to the mass media, some form of social control must be devised so that the power is not misused, and the journalist is made socially responsible and accountable without compromising their freedom and autonomy. The importance of professional ethics has meant that it is formulated and enforced by the profession itself, thus serving as a mechanism for internal control. As Etukudo has observed,

... the press for self preservation and its social contract, sets out a code of ethics to guide practitioners in carrying out their social functions and social obligations.... The ethics is based on the principle that the responsibility for ensuring its faithful observance rests upon the journalists and not upon any government (Etukudo, 1986, pp. 6-7).

The idea that ethical standard in journalism rests on the issue of social responsibility was well articulated way back in 1960 by the International Organization of Journalists (I.O.J.), when it stated:

We are convinced that professional ethics imply ... the duty of every journalist not to tolerate the distortion of the truth and to take a stand against all attempts at falsification of information and slander. Each journalist should be aware of the responsibility which rests with him. All journalists should safeguard professional ethics and morality. It is our duty to see that future generations of journalists be brought up with a sense of responsibility and impartiality.... (cited in Jones, 1980, p. 12).

The idea of social responsibility connotes some basic features. One, it means that the journalist is answerable for their conduct and actions. It also provides some form of justification for an action when it appears to violate some moral principles. Lastly is the duty to advocate the public interest (Pratt, 1988). The issue of ethics thus puts a lot on the journalist. It is the journalist whose moral integrity as a professional is on the line. In the final analysis, it is the journalist who either as a beat reporter or editor takes the decision on 'what news is fit to print'. Ethics provides him with the basic principles on which to base such judgment.

In Nigeria, when an investigative journalist embarks on an assignment to cover a sensitive issue, such as one involving a well-known politician or well-established organisation, there is a high likelihood of

potential threats to the journalist's safety. This is due to the powerful connections and significant influence that these politicians and organisations wield. A prime example of this is the case of Dele Giwa, a popular Nigerian journalist who was killed by a parcel bomb (Ekpu, 1990, Olukotun, 2010). Attacks on journalists and media organisations is a recurring scenario with journalists continually arrested, attacked, and sometimes murdered (Akpede, 2023; Are, 2023; Channels Television, 2012). Some journalists, like David Hundeyin who published investigative articles on Nigerian presidential candidates and BBC operations in West Africa (Hundeyin, 2022), have resorted to seeking asylum in neighbouring countries like Ghana for their personal safety. As a result, journalists face a significant ethical dilemma: choosing between the public's right to be informed and their own personal safety. They must carefully assess the potential repercussions and societal impact before deciding to publish their stories.

Elements of journalistic ethics

All codes of ethics have certain fundamental elements in common. These are the ideals and goals which the 'virtuous' journalist daily strives to attain as a professional. The grand element which encompasses all the others is the notion of TRUTH. The cardinal goal of journalism or its unique responsibility as Elliot (1978) put it, is the search for the truth, which McQuail (2013, p. 57) rightly noted, 'has come to be primarily identified with neutral, reliable, verifiable reporting...' McQuail added that 'Truth in journalism is widely identified with the practice of 'objectivity', which emphasizes neutrality and balance on the part of a reporter, and a limitation as far as possible to verifiable 'facts' of any case (McQuail, 2013, p. 57). In journalism, 'respect for facts (is) the yardstick of quality (Elliot, 1978, p. 189). As noted in the Code of Ethics for Nigerian journalists, 'Truth is the cornerstone of journalism and every journalist should strive diligently to ascertain the truth of every event' (Nigerian Union of Journalists, n.d.).

The question is, what is truth? Who determines it? This is a major problem in journalism which professionally is operationalized and resolved by the adherence to what a media sociologist Gaye Tuchman called *facticity*, which among other things, connotes professional neutrality and objectivity, and a demonstration of impartiality by explicitly eschewing distortion and personal bias (Tuchman, 1978, p.160). In the attempt at realizing truth, journalists emphasize *accuracy, objectivity, fairness, balance, and comprehensiveness*. Reporters are expected to keep their opinions and views out of the news. Opinions are to be confined to editorial and opinion pages. The ultimate goal desired of any news medium is to be seen as being credible. As a British journalist once said, 'Credibility in the minds of audience is the *sine qua non* of news' (The Glasgow Media Group, 1976, p. 7).

Other elements of ethics in journalism include *neutrality, access, equality, justice, respect for facts and pluralism/diversity*. The real issue is that journalists should be impartial in their judgment of events and news selection; facts should be separated from opinion; and fairness should be accorded to all parties involved in an issue, and people should be granted access to the news columns without discrimination. Journalists are expected to be detached, impersonal, unprejudiced, and disinterested, with their personal feelings or biases set aside. In news reporting, facts are regarded as sacred.

This, of course, does not solve the problem of 'What is the truth?' Can journalism through its process of gathering and processing facts for the news arrive at the truth? As Obilade has observed, human reasoning is based on assumptions. He explains further:

The human being assumes that certain premises exist and tries to ascertain by reasoning conclusions which flow from the assumption. Naturally, when it is said that a fact is proved to be true or that a person has spoken the truth, the statement is based on the limited perception or knowledge of human beings. Thus, even in the absence of the manipulation of facts, what is regarded as the truth may not be the truth.... Similarly, what is regarded as an objective analysis of an issue may have been influenced unconsciously by some pre-conceived ideas (Obilade, 1997, p. 57).

Truth, as Shirky (2014, p. 10) has pointed out, 'is not a stable thing: it is a judgment that persuades us to believe a particular assertion'. He argued further that 'The statement we describe as true are the ones that enjoy operative consensus among relevant actors. As a consequence, any statement presented

as true can also be described as an assertion; that those who believe the statement are the people whose opinions on the subject matter, and those who don't, aren't' (Shirky, 2014, pp. 10-11).

The type of idea inherent in this statement is quite in line with the argument that the news is a social construction. As Tuchman (1978) rightly points out, 'any society's definition of news is dependent upon its social structure ... news does not mirror society. It helps to constitute it as a shared social phenomenon, for in the process of describing an event, news, defines and shapes that event' (Tuchman, 1978, p. 183). Orgad (2014) has also argued that 'any representation is inherently and inevitably a construction, a selective and particular depiction of some elements of reality, which generates certain meanings and excludes others' (p. 134). As a student of communication will know, this is related to the principles of selectivity, perception, and individual differences.

The above brings us back to a point made earlier—that is, the fact that the ultimate responsibility in deciding what is ethical lies with the journalist. In other words, it is the journalist who decides what to print. This is probably what is implied in the New York Times' phrase, 'All The News That's Fit To Print'. This, as we have emphasised, demands a lot in terms of social responsibility, wisdom, courage, justice, personal integrity, professional autonomy and independence, and such virtues. Alluding to the challenges inherent in the phrase, Gilmore and Root said:

Everyone knows that all the news can't be printed. But 'all the news' implies a thoroughness which will not omit stories because of laziness or pressure. 'Fit' implies that the editors will avoid sensationalism or pandering to low tastes. Yet they should find it fitting for the public to know what happens, however distasteful or terrifying, and regardless of pressure to leave out some events (Gilmore & Root, 1971, p. 5).

Why ethics?

Journalism is a public institution through which most people make sense of events and issues in the world. It has become society's main mechanism of meaning making. Journalism is credited with the power to frame issues, influence public opinion, and public policy agenda. Journalism does not just produce and disseminate information that is 'manifest factual content'. But media products like news and even entertainment have 'ideological and political meanings which structure our perceptions and knowledge of the world' (Dahlgren, 1992, p. 204). Drawing from Gramsci's concept of hegemony, power is exercised through discourse which flows mainly to us through the mass media. And as the saying goes, knowledge is power. It does mean that those who are charged with the production and dissemination of this knowledge must be guided by certain normative and moral standards which hopefully will lead to the production of 'healthy and wholesome' products 'fit' for human consumption, nourish citizens' appetite for meaningful and healthy participation in the political and democratic processes, to ensure participatory democracy and good governance.

We can appreciate the importance of the media in Nigerian polity if we note that of all the social institutions in the country, only the media are saddled with the responsibility of monitoring governance. The news media are considered the society's watchdog. Section 22 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution gives the obligation of the press when it states:

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in chapter two and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.

Inherent in this constitutional provision is the faith and trust in the media as related to their professional responsibility, ethical standards, and integrity as representative of the public. The mass media are expected to serve the public interest however this is defined. Much of the normative assumptions about the role and power of the mass media stem from this premise. Denis McQuail has observed in this vein that:

Underlying the proposal for a normative framework is a fundamental presumption that the media do serve the 'public interest' or the 'general welfare'. This means, in practice, that the mass media are not the same as

any business or service industry but carry out some essential tasks for the wider benefit of society, especially in cultural and political life (McQuail, 1991, p. 70).

It is assumed that for the mass media to serve 'the ends of the whole society rather than those of some sectors of the society' (Banfield 1955, cited in McQuail, 1991, p. 71), the society expects the professionals in the industry to be guided by certain moral principles. As McQuail further argues without this type of guiding assumption about the role of the media, 'it is quite pointless for those outside the media to bother with normative principles, or for those inside to claim to be putting them into practice.'

The concern about ethical conduct in media practice is also a sign of the development of journalism as a profession. In the trait theory of professionalism, the adoption of a code of ethics is accepted as one of the core-attributes a profession must possess to be so called. It is seen as part of the development of professional consciousness and the attempt to protect the autonomy and integrity of the profession. With ethical codes, journalists as professionals, are expected to be morally upright. Ethics codes as a branch of moral philosophy "asserts that professionals generally acquire more obligations by virtue of their professional role and standing within various cultures. It is those roles that bind them to higher standards than those expected of 'non-professionals'" (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004, p. 302).

The media are expected to provide the information needed by the citizens within the proper context and perspective in order for the citizens to be able to participate fully and meaningfully in the socio-political affairs of the society. As Stuart Hall has noted, the mass media have 'progressively colonized the cultural and ideological sphere' in our modern world. (Hall, 1977, p. 340) The mass media define social reality. This implies a lot of power to influence not only public opinion but electoral and political decisions and public policy in general. There are many people who believe that the enormous power of the press has not been accompanied by sufficient social responsibility and integrity. Ralph Akinfeleye quoted a media analyst, O'Neil, who said:

... there has been an astonishing growth in the power of the media, but I doubt if there have been any correspondent increases in the social responsibility and journalistic integrity on the part of the journalists. The tendency has been to revel in power, and we wield it freely rather than accept any corresponding increase in responsibility and attainment of journalistic integrity (Akinfeleye, 2007, p. 34).

As we all know, the social space, or what Habermas called the public sphere, is now a contested terrain for those seeking power and other privileges on offer in the political and economic realm. This scenario is evident within Nigeria's social media space where the quest for power has created new opportunities for users who have amassed a significant following. These individuals, referred to as 'social media influencers', mostly commercialise their followership to interested political elites or organisations, by seeking payment from clients to promote their agendas and interests. In pursuit of power, Nigerian social media 'influencers do not show any form of disparity as they mix everything' (Olaajo, 2020, p. 2), they influence politics, advocacy and marketing products interchangeably. The contestants in the battle for our minds and the pictures in our heads, to quote Walter Lipmann, thus strive for the mass media to publish their own 'truth' as they want us to see it (Lippmann, 1965).

The 'public' may however want something different. Truth becomes a contestable issue and thus journalism as a mediatory institution is placed in a very difficult situation. The problem is, whose truth is the truth? Can adherence to ethics help resolve such a professional dilemma? The master concept in journalistic ethic, objectivity, is also a highly contested concept that functions more as an ideal than an attainable objective (Oso & Arowolo, 2018). As many scholars have argued, objectivity in the news help the journalists and their organisations to conceal their bias and operational weakness. It is also argued that objectivity was developed as a market strategy to appeal to diverse readers and a devise for 'an accommodation to power' (Curran, 2011, p. 10). Schudson and Anderson have also argued that 'journalistic objectivity operates as both an occupational norm and as an object of struggle within the larger struggle over professional jurisdiction' (Schudson & Anderson, 2009, p. 96).

Another problem with ethics is the contradictions inherent in its operation. What does the journalist do when the 'truth' clashes with national security? For instance, has the American press been fair in its coverage of Islam and the Muslim World? Recall the battle for the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), and how the American and British Media reported the debate. Were they fair? James Curran has argued that the American media 'offered a heavily establishment perspective in their coverage of the

Iraqi war (Curran, 2011). This same argument could be made for other sensitive topics, such as the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency, armed banditry, cattle rustling, gunmen attacks and killings, terrorism, and kidnappings in Nigeria. We must always bear in mind that journalism is a battlefield where many interests clash and struggle for dominance. As they say in war, truth is the first casualty. In such a situation, what is 'fit' to print becomes problematic. Other considerations besides ethical principles may predominate.

The point being stressed here is that some of the allegations we level against the journalists, though quite legitimate, are often not the real issues that should be the focus of ethics. Exaggeration of figures in a report of an accident, misleading headlines, moonlighting, and such infringements on the technical norms of journalism, corruption among journalists, cartel reporting etc. pale into insignificance when we consider the way the powerful social groups in the society use the media to 'manufacture consent' to borrow from the title of the quite illuminating book by Herman and Chomsky. Using the skills and strategies of professional communication advocates (PR, advertising, and marketing professionals), the powerful social groups are more able to manipulate the news production process to their own advantage. The political and materially powerful social groups are better able to make their events and activities not just more noticeable but significant for media attention. As Lippmann observed years ago, '... the news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself' (Lippmann, 1965, p. 216). This is, of course, in addition and/or taking advantage of professional and organisational routines of journalism practice. By their location and material endowment, those in positions of power and authority have a better chance of taking advantage of these routines.

For instance, one of the measures of objectivity in journalism is the social status and expertise/authoritativeness of sources. By adhering to these routines and values, journalists more often than not turn to the state officials and other people within the powerful social groups as news sources, thus amplifying their voices, interests, and concerns. Those considered to be in positions of authority and/or with the expertise and knowledge readily gain access to the news. Berkowitz was within this vein when he observed that 'Sources located within a power structure, who have both authority of knowledge and autonomy to speak about that knowledge, tend to be most powerful ... Thus, at the simplest level, power for a source translates to the ability to have a voice in an ongoing debate in the news agenda' (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 105). Based on certain factors like timelines and immediacy, market competition and lack of requisite material resources and manpower, the views of these powerful figures are taken as facts without the need for research and verification. However, as Berkowitz has rightly argued,

In most societies, fact bearers live in the ideologically dominant mainstream, representing that mainstream's dominant ideological institutions and presenting their dominant frame (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 109).

In the process, political journalism becomes package offerings which the journalists quite unwittingly sell to us as news. This situation, which tend to weaken ethical standard, is further aided by the political, economic, and material context of media practice.

This problem is further aggravated by the nature of the mass media. This is in the sense of the dual social character of the mass media. The mass media are both commercial and ideological institution. The media are both profit-making organisations like other commercial entities, but unlike them, they are producer(s) of meaning, creator(s) of social consciousness (Hallin, 1994, p. 34). This dual character poses a lot of challenges to the observance and enforcement of ethics in journalism. Journalism is buffeted by waves from many seas. It is an essential part of the democratic process. It is simultaneously a profit-making business, a form of entertainment, and a political institution with complexities to the state and other powerful political actors. As an institution, it is often torn between the imperatives of the market, political ideology and popular fashion, and journalistic professionalism.

In many societies, particularly in those where instrumentalization of the media is the practice, control of journalism as a social institution is often external to the practitioners. In such a situation, upholding ethical standard becomes very difficult for practitioners. In Nigeria, under the normative demand of development media theory, and the doctrine of national security, the media, especially broadcasting, are quite sensitive government state interests. Pratt (1988) found that the Nigerian press tended to be more sensitive and responsive to the development agenda of the government under the pretext of developmental journalism, hence the predominance of utilitarian ethics in editorial comments. In addition to this are other issues affecting adherence to ethics, at least in the Nigerian context.

First in this regard is the parlous economic state of the Nigerian media industry. Apart from the issue of corruption among Nigerian journalists, which many often argue is due to poor remuneration and welfare package in the industry, many media organisations are just struggling to survive. They find it difficult to employ competent journalists. They easily accept hand-outs (PR releases), cover scheduled events because they cannot afford the cost of independent coverage and investigative journalism, and oftentimes, organizers of such events pay for coverage (Adeniran et al., 2022). In such cases, the quality and quantity of what is reported depend on the amount paid. Thus, on television for instance, business and economic news is limited to news of the sale of stocks at the Nigerian Stock Exchange, Annual General Meetings of companies, and the views of the so-called captains of industry. In order to stay afloat, television stations are ready to shift the airing of their main evening newscast because the time belt has been sold to sponsors of one event or the other, while newspapers sell their front and back pages to corporate organisations and political parties for what is called *wrap-round*. In the new world of market-driven journalism, nothing is sacred.

Second, the material context of news production greatly influences what is 'fit to print'. Hence, in a competitive media market, media organisations sometimes bend the rule to satisfy the demand of the market. It now seems clear that increasing commercialization has altered the balance within news organisations between the public-interest culture of journalism and the culture of commodity production (Hallin, 1994). The over-concentration of coverage on certain individuals, institutions and events is evident of this commercial approach to the news. And of course the neglect of many others. Studies within the critical political economy perspective have shown the interplay between symbolic and economic dimensions of public communication. The approach has indicated 'how different ways of financing and organizing cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses, representation and communicative resources in the public domain and for the organization audience, access and use' (Murdock & Golding, 2005, p. 60).

In a marketized media world where the logic of profitability, and the struggle for survival operate, adherence to ethics becomes very difficult. Journalism has become greatly enmeshed and underguarded in its operations by market forces. Content, if not mainly entertainment and sensationalized, is dressed up to make it appealing in the crowded market-place of ideas. The advent of digital and citizen journalism with its click-baits and 'most viewed stories popularity contest' (Steele, 2014, p. viii) has further worsened the economic and social crisis of journalism. Ethics has been a major victim of the battle for audience attention in the market-place of ideas in which journalism is practiced.

Hence, though journalists (often the main focus of concern on ethics) have their inadequacies, the material and economic context of media practice has some implications for the operations of journalism. It seems quite inadequate to talk of the flaws in media practice in the discussion of ethics without a critical examination of the socio-economic structure underpinning the institution and practice of journalism. The mass media are now big businesses run like other businesses along the logic of profit maximization. Whatever the ethics of journalism may dictate, the commercial logic of the market is often there to have the last say. In market-driven journalism, consideration for the bottom-line may override ethical consideration or even legal strictures.

Another form of unwitting bias in journalism which quite unconsciously closes the media space against a large percentage of the citizens are the factors that influence news production. News is often about the elite, the powerful, the visible, the current and the sensational. If your case or an issue cannot fit into these criteria, it does not become news. Hence, the poor, the disadvantaged and issues connected to them hardly get into the news net, except of course when they disrupt the social order as constructed by the powerful social groups. In other words, the inequality of the socio-economic system is unwittingly manifested in inequality in access and representation in the mass media; economic power determining cultural and political power, and symbolic representation.

Ethics as a problem

Just as ethics is a contested concept, so also is it indeterminable. Its boundaries change; 'the never-completed project of inventing, applying and critiquing the principles that guide human

interaction, define social roles and justify institutional structures' (Ward, 2009, p. 296). It seems the search for ethics in journalism as desirable as it is, is an ideal that will remain a problem for the profession. As Sobowale (1998) observed, journalism is unlike many other professions. According to him,

Ordinarily, considerable uniformity ought to exist in its practice as in other professions. But unlike other professions, communication deals with people's perceptions, opinions, attitudes and behavior. These are not standardized properties (Sobowale, 1998, p. 72).

As an institution with the mechanism and power to represent and construct social reality, journalism is too important for it to be left in the hands of its practitioners, however disinterested or ethically inclined they may be. Almost all social groups and actors, especially the powerful ones, make various attempts and adopt various strategies to influence its production process and 'bend reality' in their favour. In this regard, discussion of ethics in journalism must be properly situated within the nature and character of the society. Golding has spoken in this vein when he observed that it is 'meaningless to discuss any institution such as Mass Communication as if operated in isolation, unconnected to other social processes (Golding, 1977). Earlier, Siebert et al. (1956) asserts, 'The press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates' (Siebert et al., 1956, p.1).

It means that the values which underpin media practice will be derived from the overarching social and political values and concerns of the larger society. This is an area where agreement could be difficult. This value and concerns are not universal or eternal; they are socio-historically determined. The point is that ethical codes in both their formulation, interpretation and observance are not socially and culturally neutral. According to Wilkins & Brennen (2004, p. 298), 'Ethics codes are explicit forms of practical communication created in a historically specific society and produced under particular social, economic and political conditions'. Ethics, they added, reflects the condition of journalism and the lived realities of the relationship between the media and the society.

In a pluralistic society like Nigeria, deeply polarized along ethnic, regional and religious lines, where the various factions of social and political elite are perpetually at war against each other, whose truth should the mass media present? In a society where the competing ruling class factions and the generality of the people are sharply divided along ethnic, religious and primordial lines, where consensus on basic public issues and even private morality is lacking, truth cannot be universal. We may also note that these divisions are reflected in media orientation and public perception of the media. Hence the categorization of the Nigerian press into *Arewa Press*, *Nigbati Press*, *Igbo Press*, minority press and so on, representing the country's ethnic/regional divisions and its fault lines (Oso, 2012). Adherence to ethics becomes very difficult, and problematic in a society with 'multiple cleavages of tongues, tribes, clans and altars' (Oni, 2022, p. 21). Public perception, definition of issues and public discourse tend to be influenced and structured by these ethnic differences/regional divides.

Apart from this, the level of adherence to ethics in any society by any professional group is related to the overall moral tone of the society, especially among the leadership. Olukotun (2022) observed in this vein that ethical violations rarely feature in the public space, noting further that 'the standards or ethics are extremely low ... not to mention the capacity of leaders to downplay and wash-off public concern about ethical standards. Alfred Opubor must have been referring to this when he observed that,

the fact that the Nigerian media are the way they are first because Nigerian society has been motivated by the forces of ethnicity and fuelled by aggressive partisanship; and the media having imbibed of this influence, derive their character from it (Opubor, 1989, p. vii).

The complex and intricate nature of Nigerian politics and society creates a lot of ethical dilemmas for Nigerian journalists. After all, the journalist is as Nigerian as any other Nigerian. They live and work in the same socio-political environment with all its push and pull. The British scholar, Richard Hoggart has argued that one of the most important filters through which journalists construct news 'is the cultural air we breathe, the whole ideological atmosphere of our society, which tells us that some things can be said and that others had best not be said' (Bennett, 1982, p. 303). The Nigerian journalist is born, socialized, lives, and functions within the socially and politically constructed cultural milieu. Though this may be mediated by professional and organizational demands, deep down it exists, and influences the journalist's professional judgment.

The average Nigerian inhabits two separate public realms, the primordial realm, and the civic realm. The two realms or publics are differentiated in terms of morality. Years back, Ekeh (1975) has argued that:

... there are two public realms in post-colonial Africa, with different types of moral linkages to the private realm. At one level is the public realm in which primordial groupings, ties and sentiments influence and determine the individual's public behavior ... The primordial public is moral and operates on the same moral imperatives as the public realm... The civic public...is amoral and lacks the generalized moral imperatives operative in the private realm and the primordial public (Ekeh, 1975, p. 92).

Journalism is an institution of the civic public which, according to Ekeh, is 'badly starved of badly needed morality' (1975, p. 11). In a society like Nigeria where such virtues as integrity are in a very short supply, it may be a tall-order asking poorly paid journalists to obey the code of conduct of the profession. Philosophers of ethics are aware of this problem, hence their categorization of ethics into various types (see Fadahunsi, 2001; Pratt, 1988).

Related to this is the question of ownership and control of the mass media. The issue of media ethics presupposes some high level of autonomy and independence for the professional. While it is necessary to avoid crude instrumentalist account of media control, we cannot gloss over the influence of ownership on general media performance. Liebling (1975, p. 32), could have exaggerated a bit but his statement, 'freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one', reflects the power and influence of ownership in the media. In a political setting where owning a newspaper or radio station is one of the crucial elements in the political power game (Oso, 2012), professional journalists are often under pressure to bend the rules to accommodate the interest of their employers.

In liberal democratic theory, the media are expected to serve as society's watchdog, the ever-vigilant sentinel on surveillance to detect and bark at any form of abuse of power. But the fundamental problem is how we expect the dog, however vigilant and/or fierce, to bark and bite its owner who feeds and takes care of its needs and provides its means of sustenance and survival.

Through ownership, official/state linkages (e.g. as main sources of news, news subsidy, advertising, and other forms of client-patron networks), the media and their workers are closely tied to society's structure of power. Many studies exploring the influence of ownership on the relationship between media and politics in Nigeria have shown that the media are more or less instruments in the struggle for power by their owners and their allies, and the defence of their business interests. The media are important part of the weapons of political warfare in Nigeria. In his study of newspapers owned by Nigerian politician-businessmen, Ojebode (2013) notes that 'although Nigeria is a democracy, journalists working in PBO media organisations have little elbow room to operate professionally ... In their 'daily bread' they have become combative and unethical (p. 306). Similarly, Adebani (2016) has also observed that, 'In their narratives of power, the Nigerian press mobilizes 'the nation' for the strategic interests of whatever power the various newspapers and news magazines serve (p. 287).

By general orientation and their structural context, the mass media are 'agents of power' (Altschull, 1984). Unfortunately, discussions of media ethics tend to gloss over the meaning and implications of this fact. One of these is the dominance of the interest of powerful in the media. Whether in the area of politics or business, the media quite often reproduce the structure of social inequality in the society. The concern here goes beyond the issue of personal bias, distortion, or objectivity in terms of technical news reporting. Through organizational structure, professional routines and values and economic imperatives, the news privileges the activities of the state and other powerful social actors. News 'reflects the perspectives of those at the top' (Gans, 2005, p. 46). It is about whose interests the media ultimately serve (Oso, 2012). It is about the interpretative framework provided by the media. The news is generally the preserve of the powerful, most often, men. Many social groups, the poor and rural dwellers, women, and youth, are poorly represented in the news. Issues are socially and historically decontextualized; evacuating from them issue of power and various forms of inequalities existing in the society. Discussions about ethics quite often do not touch such fundamental issues. But we must be concerned about the type of representation accorded each social group in the society and how equitable, society-wide, and fair such representation is. Our concern should also be about how comprehensive and socially relevant the messages disseminated by media are. We must be concerned about diversity of news sources and deepening the views and perspectives of marginalized social groups. Our attention must be directed at the

structures of social and economic inequalities that close the social space provided by the mass media to a large percentage of the citizenry.

With its porous borders, multifarious forms, nebulous professional status, and the near impossibility of 'scrupulous policing' (Broaddason, 2000, p. 157), incursion into the journalistic field has been quite easy. This openness has further been exacerbated by the Internet with its offspring—bloggers, social media influencers, and citizen journalists. These new entrants have little or no regard for ethics or standards. Their incursion into journalism has desecrated its sacredness and drained it of the veneration and trust the public accord, both the practitioners and media organisations (Broaddason, 2000). While technology has greatly democratized access to the public sphere, offering different alternative platforms for challenging the discourse power of the elite and powerful social actors, the scant regard for ethics, the dissemination of fake news or alternative truth and hate speeches have created a lot of concern not only for the conventional media system but also for citizens and the society. What appears like a prophesy by Broaddason seems to be manifesting:

In the long term, however, as news gathering expert systems become available to the general public, the gatekeeping function of news people will diminish and, as a group, they will probably experience deprofessionalization, or even worse (Broaddason, 2000, p. 161).

Conclusion

As Jones noted in his 1980 UNESCO report, codes of ethics to guide the practice of journalism 'has now become one of the most complex issues of our time in the world of mass communication media' (Jones, 1980, p. 10). Ethics in media practice is important and crucial to the realisation of the basic ideals of a democratic society. It is however our contention that the emphasis placed on the moral inadequacies of the journalists as individuals may be missing the point. The discussion of ethical misconduct or otherwise is too much individualistic and psychologistic. It is our position in this paper that the mass media as a social institution and the journalists who work in this institution can best be understood if they were properly contextualised within the socio-historical set-up of the society, in this context, Nigeria. Ethics as an expression of values should also not be abstracted from this structural set-up.

We therefore argue that while concerns about media ethics is important, it is more important, relevant, and germane to bother about material and economic barriers to media access and representation in Nigeria. These are the ultimate factors which vitiate the crucial roles of the media in the democratic process. The journalist may even be a victim of these structural constraints.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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