

IMPERATIVES OF ETHICS IN JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Abstract

Journalism is guarded by set of standards aimed at giving direction to the trade. Ethics chart a course and draw a road map for professionals with a view to abiding by these standards for the general goal of serving the public and their benefit. Thus, every profession has code of ethics. For journalism, there are a countless of them, which are usually in the kit of journalists. If they abide by it, the journalism profession will be the envy of all. However, on the contrary, journalism will never be craved for even by upcoming youths. So, for journalism to be seen as an enviable profession, standards in the form of ethics must be upheld. This paper, therefore, aims at laying bare the imperative of ethics, and to x-ray the importance of Ethics in Journalistic Practice in Nigeria.

***Keywords.* Journalism, ethics, journalist, profession, roadmap**

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, like every other country of the world, journalism is a prominent profession. Its prominence stems from the recognition it garnered from the supreme law book - the Constitution, where in Nigeria for instance, section 39, sub-section 2 of 1999 Constitution shows some form of recognition and stipulates, inter alia; “without prejudice to the generality of this section, every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions”.

The empowerment of the constitution especially for people to establish media organization is by extension giving leverage to journalist to perform, since no media can exist without the journalist.

Similarly, the Freedom Of Information Act passed by the National Assembly on the 24th of May, 2011 and accented to by the immediate past President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed

Forces, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan on the 28th May, 2011 was also an empowerment for the journalist to perform their revered responsibilities optimally for society interest, hence (Okoye, 2007, p.48) opines; “press freedom is, therefore, essential to ensure that those in authority are constantly monitored so that they do not overstep their bounds, to the detriment of the society. This forms the central idea of what the journalist should do, thereby in course of trying to ensure performance, the FOIA was conceived and eventually accented to.

Udoakah, (2014, p.34) gives insight into the conceptualization of the FOIB (now Act) this way; “the access to public records and information bill should be enacted into law to give effects to section 36 of the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which guarantees every person the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas”.

However, with this robust empowerment, it is expedient to ascertain the potency of the responsibilities of the journalist.

The, journalists, over the years have been in the business of delivering their responsibility which revolves around reading the society or letting them know what they should know. Imagine a society without the journalist. The said society will be bereft of information and, if there is dearth of information, the society, generally will pay for it. Thus, for the journalist to optimally do this, they must follow the trend and tenets of journalism, which is embedded in the codes of journalism.

The code of journalism captures the ethics of journalism. It is the ethics as embedded in the code that directs these professionals on how to carry out their responsibilities. When these responsibilities are adequately carried out according to laid down guideline, the profession, like others would be taken to be doing the prescribed functions.

It is therefore, instructive to note that ethics in every sense of the word is ubiquitous. What it means is that ethics is associated with professions and professionals everywhere

geared towards instilling standards, like other profession, journalism also conforms to certain standards in so much as it is a profession, meaning therefore, that no profession can be so recognized without standardized code of ethics. Oduncmu (2000) and Okunna (2003) did not agree less as according to them, for any occupation to be considered a profession, it must have a code of ethics. So by professional ethics, we have in mind the study of standards, of conduct and moral judgment; of a system of code of morals of a particular profession.

It is therefore, the idea behind this discourse to x-ray the imperatives of ethics vis-a-vis the journalism practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

In a discourse such as this, and in a discipline like mass communication, it is unavoidable to do a theoretical framework to enhance explanation using observable phenomenon aimed at acquiring more knowledge. To achieve this, select theories shall be harvested and brought to fore for the singular purpose of giving impetus and a platform to situate the entire discourse.

To this end, two theories were selected. They include;

Social Responsibility Theory

Development Media Theory

2.1 Social Responsibility Theory evolved from an American initiative, the commission on freedom of press. It came through the instrumentality of Hutchins Commission. McQuail (1987,p.116) established that, “in particular, the technological and commercial development of the press were said to have led to lower changes of access for individuals and diverse groups and lower standards of performance in meeting the informational, social and moral needs of society. At the

same time, the rise of the new and seemingly powerful media of radio and film had demonstrated the need for some kind of public control and means .of accountability.”

In the same vein Asemah, et al, (2017) citing Shah, (2010) observed that the crux behind the emergence of the social responsibility stems from the fact that, a judicious mix of self-regulation and state regulation and high professional standards were imperative.

Instructively, the foregoing gives impetus to this discourse to use the social responsibility theory, because the discourse is premised on professional standards and regulations to mention but a few, which is the main thrust of this paper. The theory is apt.

2.2 Development Media Theory was formulated and popularized by McQuail in 1987. Its major preoccupation is on an attempt to explain the normative behaviors of the press in countries that are conventionally classified together as developing countries (Asemah, 2017, p.56).

Going forward, in the development media theory which is also called the media support theory, the media ventured into the function of embarking on positive development programmes. Importantly, therefore, the media adapted restrictions and instructions from the state (Asemah, 2017).

The foregoing is the main thrust this paper as the media (journalists) accept restrictions and instructions from the state, which by implication is binding to the ethics of the journalistic profession, hence the pointer to the fact that, the theory is apt for this discourse.

3. Conceptual Construct

3.1 Ethics: An Overview

Ethics is associated with standards a particular profession or body should strive to abide

by. It has being with these professionals and professions for years past. Ethics, therefore, can be described as old as man. This is because ethics has affinity with morals which has being part of man from generations. Every profession, like journalism is guided by the ethics which is why Yalaju, (2001 p.37) reveals that; “most professional bodies, organizations, communities and individual are guided in their interactions by their ethical standard and law is general”.

Yalaju, (2001) continued by saying that ethics is that science of knowledge, which deals with the nature of ground of moral obligations distinguishing what is right from what is wrong. He made reference to philosophy, wherein he established that, in philosophy, ethics essentially is the study of human conduct with regard to their moral principles - actions deem right or wrong by those they apply to.

Okunna, (2003, p.1) shares in the contention, stating that ethics is seen by philosophers as having affinity with morality and both involving human action. Similarly, Okunna, (2003) and Yalaju, (2001, P.37) agree that ethics is a Greek word.

To Yalaju, ethics is derived from the Greek work ethikos (i.e.) moral and the related term ethos (character) which means customs and habits and refers to general values or rules of conduct accepted and revered by a professional group, community or person.

Going forward, and still sharing in the contention, Okunna (2003) maintained that, the word ‘ethics’ comes from the Greek word ‘ethos’ which means character, while the word morals comes from the Latin word moral which means custom or manner.

From the foregoing, there is a nexus between ethics and morality. To give credence to the above contention, Okunna (2003) citing BBC English Dictionary (1992) x-rayed two concepts from where a conclusion can be drawn. To the dictionary; ethics refers to ‘moral

beliefs and rules about right and wrong' and, morals are principles and belief concerning right and wrong behaviour.

To further give credence to the positions canvassed above, Okoye, (2007, p. 10) established that ethics is the branch of philosophy which deals with judgment as to rightness or wrongness, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval of our action. In the same vein, Okoye, citing Webster Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defined ethics as the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligations. He concluded by affirming that ethics can also be defined as a normative science of conduct which is concerned with right thing to do. The foregoing contentions points to the expediency associated with ethics in journalism.

3.2 Journalistic Ethics

According to Okunna, (2003) journalistic ethics can be defined as that branch of philosophy that helps journalists determine what is right to do by giving them standards by which they can judge actions to be right or wrong, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible.

Okunna went on to aver that journalistic ethics is associated with problems inherent in journalist practice. Going forward, she raised some questions which move the basis for advancement.

- What standards should journalists adhere to in the practice of their profession?
- What is good journalism and what is bad journalism?
- What should the journalist do in a particular situation?
- What should journalism do for its practitioners; its audiences and the society?

The foregoing forms the basis for understanding the intricacies of journalism vis-a-vis

ethics.

Ochonogor, (2008) reveals that in the journalism profession and as part of their ethics, they must ensure adaptability or fairness and, especially jettison the unwarranted meddlesomeness particularly to individual privacy. This and many more are the journalistic code of ethics.

3.3 The Need for Journalistic Ethics

Journalistic ethic helps to draw road map for practicing journalist for the general good of the citizenry.

Therefore, the purpose of journalistic ethics is to stipulate rules, guidelines, norms and principles that would guide the journalist in making normal discussion. These rules and guidelines as well as the norms, values and principles designed to guide journalists and regulate their ethical behaviour (Okunna, 2003, p.41-42).

It is instructive to note that without journalistic code of ethics for journalists, the abnormal will be the order-of-the-day, thereby derailing in the supposed responsibilities and to the detriment of the society generally. Therefore, ethics for professionals, particularly for journalist is unavoidable.

3.4 The Ideals of Journalism

Journalism and practice stems from the need to reach the citizenry. To do this, information need to flow from the organization, individual reporter to the society who deserve to know. It is only when they strive to inform the society of happening that they can be said to be doing the needful. Encouragingly, they are protected by the Nigerian Constitution, even though the protection is anchored on a weak platform, the world over, but particularly in some African enclave. The media, which journalism is an embodiment

is referred to as the fourth estate of the realm, meaning that its role is unquantifiable. No wonder, in dealing with the social responsibility theory in this regard, it will point to what the journalist should do for the society to be considered to be discharging its responsibilities adequately. In doing that also, their role is representing the society on issues pertaining to public opinion is unavoidable, even though there are inherent limitations and challenges, especially of sources of practice and others hence, Lewis and Wahi- Jorgensen (2010, p. 105) reiterates; “it is the task of journalism to speak on behalf of or represent public opinion, yet in doing so journalists are faced with demands which have more to do with deep-rooted newsroom practices”.

Beyond the foregoing, Patterson and Wilkens, (2008, p.98) reports that journalists have two central responsibilities that are distinct because of the role journalist play in the modern society. First, for the duo, they have a greater responsibility to tell the truth than members of most profession. Second, journalists also seem to carry a somewhat greater obligation to foster political activity than the average person.

Citing May (2001) Patterson, et al, (2008) outlined further the responsibilities of the journalist, especially in consonance with his professional practice and tenets. According to May (2001) and Patterson, et al, (2008) these include:

- » Fulfill the informational and entertainment mission of the media
- Understand your audience's needs
- Strive to enhance professional development of self and others
- Avoid the abuse of power and position
- Conduct professional activities in ways that uphold or surpass the ideals of virtue and competence.

Therefore, judging from the foregoing, it is crystal clear that the duty of the journalist and

of journalism is anchored on social responsibility. The social responsibility canvassed by McQuail, (2005, p. 172) exemplifies particularly the ideals the journalist must uphold.

These means that media (journalists) responsibility must include:

- Media should accept fulfill certain obligations to society
- These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.
- In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self regulating within the framework of law and established institutions
- The media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offence to minority groups.
- The media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society, giving access to various points of views and right to reply.
- Society and public, following the first named principle have a right to expect high standards of performance and intervention can be justified to secure the, or a, public good.
- Journalists and media professional should be accountable to society as well as to employers and the market.

More than highlighting the social responsibility of the media and executed, to a large extent by the journalist, the magnified ideals of the journalist or journalism is basically on ‘...setting high or professional standards of INFORMATION, TRUTH, ACCURACY, OBJECTIVITY AND BALANCE’ McQuail, 2005 as cited by (Obot, 2008, p. 125).

Thus, failure to abide by this particular ideal will amount to violating the journalistic ideals and standards, which will invariably be detrimental to the society who is always expectant as to what the media (journalist) would offer them. It therefore, behooves the media to exemplify these ideals for the general interest of all and sundry.

Frontally, what it means is that the journalist in carrying out his onerous function must

endeavour to be truthful in all his reportage of issues. As part of the ethics, attempts to sacrifice truthfulness on the altar of whatever will amount to failing in the responsibility. Talking about accuracy, it is expedient for journalists to uphold this tenet, as anything falling short of this, would mean misinformation, which will not only be dangerous but counterproductive. Objectivity entails that the journalistic personae should exhibit some strong level of impartiality, which Boyd, (1999, p. 173) says; “comes at times of internal division or external conflict”. Boyd went on to say that to attain impartiality status is usually difficult, however, proffered some solutions thus:

Complete impartiality is like perfection; an ideal for which many will strive but none will wholly attain. Even the most respected journalist can only be the sum of his/her beliefs, experience and attitudes, the product of his/her society, culture and upbringing. No one can be free from bias, however, hard they may try to compensate by applying professional standards of objectivity.

Thus, objectivity for Boyd, (1999) is to eradicate bias. For him, “the process of eradicating bias begins by recognizing that every argument has at least two sides and the truth probably lies somewhere between them, 'the journalist must stand back and view the argument from all sides, before scrupulously drawing out the key points to produce as full balanced and impartial a picture as possible in the time available” (p. 172).

The Boyd, (1999) position gained a tremendous support from Ekwueme, (2008, p.44) when he declared, "He (journalist) must not allow sentiments to becloud his thoughts or prevent him from asking all the right questions and thus prevent him from presenting a balanced, fair and well-rounded report or account of any occurrence”.

The foregoing has unfettered affinity with balance, meaning, therefore, that the journalist should give equal opportunity to persons to respond, react or hear in any contending issue before the journalist. It is only by so doing that the society can build and grow the confidence in the indispensability of the media.

3.5 The Components of Journalism Code of Ethics Professional Conduct

Journalists are constitutionally, morally, professionally, ethically and socially liable and accountable to the society to execute their roles. Granted, journalists are also humans with blood running through their veins, but they are expected to hold on to their vested roles and responsibilities with utmost commitment. To do this, Ekwueme, (2008, p.48) recaps a seven-point principles of practice set by Eugene Meyer, which he says could easily pass for the general principles of journalism. He enumerated them thus;

- That the first mission of a newspaper (Journalist) is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained;
- That the newspaper (journalist) tells ALL the truth so far as it can learn it, concerning the important affairs of America and world;
- That what it prints shall be fit for reading for the young as well as the old;
- That the newspapers duty is to its readers and to the public at large, and not to the private interests of the owners;
- That in the pursuit of truth, the newspaper (journalist) shall be prepared to make sacrifice of its material fortunes, if such course be necessary for public good;
- That the newspaper shall not be the ally of any special interest but shall be fair, free and wholesome on its outlook on public affairs and public men

Similarly, Boyd, (1999, p. 185) outlined the professional code of a journalist, wherein he stated inter alia that;

- A journalist has a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards

- A journalist shall at all times defend the principles of the freedom of the press and other media in relation to the collection of information and expression of comment and criticism. He/She shall strive to eliminate distortion, news suppression and censorship.
- A journalist shall strive to ensure that the information he/she disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established facts and falsification by distortion, selection or misrepresentation.
- A journalist shall rectify promptly and harmful inaccuracies, ensure that correction and apologies receive due prominence and afford the right of reply to persons criticized when the issue is of sufficient importance.
- A journalist shall obtain information, photographs and illustrations only by straight forward means. The use of other means can be justified only by overriding considerations of the public interest. The journalist is entitled to exercise a personal conscientious objection to the use of such means.
- Subject to justification by overriding considerations of the public interest, a journalist shall do nothing which entails intrusion into private grief distress
- A journalist shall protect confidential sources of information.
- A journalist shall not accept bribes nor shall he or she allow other inducements to influence the performance of his/her professional duties.
- A journalist shall not lend himself/herself to the distortion or the suppression of the truth because of advertising or other consideration.
- A journalist shall only mention a person's race, colour, creed, illegitimacy, disability, mental status (or lack of it), gender of sexual orientation if this information is strictly relevant.

- A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination on any of the above-mentioned grounds.
- A journalist shall not take private advantage of information gained in the course of his/her duties, before the information is public knowledge.
- A journalist shall not by way of statement, voice or appearance endorse by advertisement any commercial product or service, save for the promotion of his/her own work or of the medium by which he/she is employed.

In similar fashion, Okunna, (2003, p.47) chronicles the principles of professional ethics - journalism and particularly from the perspective of global view. Here, Okunna enumerated them viz, using principles:

- Principle I: People's right to true information
- Principle II: The journalists' dedication to objective reality
- Principle III: The journalists' social responsibility
- Principle IV: The journalist's professional integrity
- Principle V: Public access and participation
- Principle VI: Respect for privacy and human dignity
- Principle VII: Respect for public interest
- Principle VIII: Respect for universal value and diversity of cultures
- Principle IX: Elimination of war and other great evils confronting humanity
- Principle X: Promote of a new world information and communication order

The foregoing journalistic code of Professional conduct as canvassed by Boyd, (1999) Ekwueme, (2008) and Okunna, (2003) are clear indications that the journalist are faced with myriads of responsibilities, which must not be treated with levity, hence Ekwueme, (2008) sums it up this way:

“(Journalistic) principles are meant to guide the reporter in the discharge of his duties. It behooves the reporter then to make most of them if he wishes to be respected voice in

the public affairs. It is simply obvious that any reporter that is guided by the above principles will definitely have his work written in gold in the annals of journalism”.

Instructively, this can be achieved if the journalist employ or imbibe self-discipline, hence Boyd, (1999, p. 186) citing Federation of Australian Broadcasters reveals; “Broadcasters should be encouraged to practice self-discipline and self-regulation in areas such as codes and standards, on the basis that increased responsibility is concomitant of increased freedom”.

Okunna, (2003, p.39) agrees with federation of Australian Broadcaster as she added that “... ethics should be noted in relation of self-regulation in journalism”.

3.6 Mass Communication/Journalism and Ethics

According to Okunna, (2003), every society has its moral problems, because the journalist is a member of the society, and mass communication is just one of the many social institutions that constitute the social system, any meaningful discussion of ethical problems in mass communication must take into consideration the ethical issues and problems in the particular society which the mass media operate (p.81).

Following this position canvassed by Okunna, it is evidently clear that mass media and journalists are bedeviled with plethora of ethical problems, which when highlighted here will add impetus to the discourse and consequently enhance the essence of the discourse.

These problems as outlined by Okunna (2003) include:

- Sycophancy
- Character Assassination
- Pressure
- Confidentiality of sources/secret sources
- Afghanistan
- Bribery

- Sensationalism
- Plagiarism
- Sexism
- Moon lighting
- Invasion of privacy
- Inaccuracy
- Lying
- Lack of objectivity
- Unequal treatment

However, no matter the prevalence of these mass communication ethical problems, journalists are expected to arm themselves with quality lifestyles to downplay the negative attributes. It is only by so doing that the seeming precarious state of affairs in the journalism profession arising from in ordinate lifestyle, can sub-pedal. According to Josephson Institute, 2003 as cited by Okoye, (2007, p. 10) this attributes and values includes;

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Promise keeping
- Fidelity
- Fairness
- Caring for others
- Respect for others
- Responsible citizenship
- Pursuit of excellence
- Accountability

Every journalist who abides by these values, no doubt, will be near perfection and, by that level of perfection, overcoming ethical maladies in journalism will be exterminated. Therefore, as a matter of priority every journalist in the quest to advance ethically in the profession, should strive to imbibe the values and attributes as prescribed by Okoye. If the attributes are practiced, overtime, it will be part of the

practitioners and ethical issues would have been addressed.

3.7 Imperative of Ethics in Journalistic Practice in Nigeria

Having addressed and itemized the plethora of mass communication ethical problems, which forms a frontier to advance on this discourse, it is expedient to deal with the imperatives of ethics in journalistic practice for the imperative to hold sway or be readily seen.

The journalist must adhere to the professional guidelines to ensuring professionalism and adherence to journalistic ethics. This must happen for the benefit of all.

On the contrary, if these codes of professional ethics are violated, it definitely would have impeding and damaging effects on the stakeholders. So, there is need for total compliance. It is important that journalist abide by the ethics because it will make them get the direction required to carry out their herculean responsibilities. This is because, a society without laws or codes, as the case may be, would be directionless. So, for a journalist, it would be counterproductive not to do the needful, hence the need to ensure they abide by the ethics of the profession.

Secondly, when journalists do not abide by professional ethics, the journalism profession would be practiced normlessly, thereby making it a dumping ground for all. Of course, the implication of this cannot be over imagined, as it is clear what will happen.

Basically, those who may be indicating interest in the profession and seeing the disorderliness with which it is practiced will have no choice than to abandon their interest. Consider if they are young ones who desire to venture into the profession - it will kill their desire.

Therefore, it is important and worthwhile to use this medium to ensure that the journalism

profession is practiced adequately through the adherence to professional codes of ethics. If journalists do not abide by the professional ethics, they are likely to cross their bounds. For example, getting involved in defamation and privacy cases, which will attract some form of litigations, where funds would be wasted on prosecuting the cause of litigation, thereby wasting funds that should have been put in other ventures of embarking on economics of scale.

When journalist fails to abide by the professional ethics they will be susceptible to suffering, attack, intimidation, arrest, detention, loss of job, and sometimes, death. So to avoid all of these, journalist should tenaciously hold to ethical tenets to keep them afloat. Sometimes, when this is discovered and there is penalty meted out to the establishment, sometimes, it may lead to closure of the work place, which will lead to loss of man hour and, by implication loss of revenue and income.

Above all, those with certain precarious health challenges may lose their lives, especially if not able to overcome the harsh condition that he/she may be confronted with. Sometime ago, a journalist in Bayelsa was just released from detention, after being held for two (2) years for according to them, professional misconduct.

4. Conclusion

Journalism has challenges, especially ethical challenges. However, these challenges can be curtailed if journalists as professionals abide by and adhere to countless antidotes to precarious challenges. To do these, these professionals must strive to embrace the ethical recommendations, especially as prescribed by the various codes provided at different location for journalists. There are several personal positive life attributes that journalists can imbibe. When they do this; it will help them to align themselves to professional

ethical norms. Thus, it is important to abide by their norms called professional ethical prescription, as it will enhance the status of the profession, for themselves and for onlookers or public watchers. If that happens, the profession will be the envy of all.

Above all, stick to the imperatives of journalistic ethics, it will build your confidence and it will bring glory to journalism as a profession and journalistic practice will be a rallying point for interested parties.

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