

Media ethics in the development of journalism in Nigeria



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ABSTRACT: Despite their vibrant contribution to the achievement of democratic governance in Nigeria, the mass media, if unchecked, could destabilize facets of society. Consternation stems from the fact that codes of ethics designed by media associations have not been binding on members, and all attempts by government to regulate journalism practice have been rebuffed, while journalists and mass media owners exult in unrestrained press freedom. Consequently, gross violations of media ethics plague journalism practices. To forestall the virulent socio-political impact of press actions observed in the past and institute responsible journalism, media associations and the general public, under the auspices of the legislature, should arrive at acceptable codes that will guide journalism practice.

KEYWORDS: mass media, media ethics, code of ethics, mass media owners, journalism, society



INTRODUCTION

The mass media can influence actions, change the course of events and even destroy. Since “one good journalist on the ground was worth a battalion of troops” (Dallaire, 2007, p. 16), the leader of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda during the genocide regretted his inability to exploit this arsenal. Roméo Dallaire and his men could not match the efficiency of the radio which mobilised one ethnic group against another. The Rwandan experience clearly demonstrates the overriding imperative for journalists to be guided by a code of ethics that can discourage the abuse of freedom and guarantee the application of sound judgment in information gathering, analysis and dissemination. In Nigeria, if the mass media are to support development and stability in society, they need to exercise press freedom responsibly. The inability of the press to indulge in self-examination as a social institution with a relative long history has put it in the public focus. While the press inundates the public with ethical misconducts of

public officials (Pratt, 1988; Nnamani, 2003), journalists and media owners resist any attempt to subject them and their practice to any form of control. Thus, the least restricted press in the sub-Saharan region (Pratt, 1988) exhibits features of a profession without control.

Agbese (2010) observes that the Nigeria Press Organisation Code of Honour, which outlines a journalist's duties and conduct, is to be adhered to at the journalist's discretion, and has no language of enforcement. This agrees with Merrill's (2011, p. 9) conceptualisation of media ethics as "a normative science of conduct, with conduct considered primarily self-determined, rational, and voluntary." That is, ethical principles are actualised based on personal responsibility and autonomy (Plaisance & Deppa, 2009) accompanied with press freedom (Merrill). As a social institution, the press (print and electronic) is expected to derive its ethical principles from its role in society, ensuring that it is above board in the manner of information acquisition, use and dissemination.

Ideally, a newspaper is supposed to pluck out the truth from the daily maelstrom of events, make independent and objective judgments as to its importance to readers, and print it without fear or favor. Resistance to outside pressures, including those applied by advertisers, is considered a must. (Wall Street Journal [WSJ], 1975, p. 150)

Media ethics discourse is integral in journalism practice and development. Christians (2008) and Ferré (2009) trace its scholarly development from journalism values geared at ensuring social responsibility to a normative theory of ethics that explores diverse philosophical leanings in defining truth telling, humanness, justice, freedom and stewardship to society. Nonetheless, Plaisance and Deppa (2009) found that in practice, journalists apply sets of values, rather than particular philosophical approaches in ethical decision-making. This, however, does not undermine the importance of ethics education, as some journalists tend to think, because ethical journalists develop "a strong internal sense of the appropriate professional choices" (Wilkins & Coleman, 2005, p. 127) due to having undergone ethics education. Moreover, maturity in ethics develops through recognising moral issues, and assessing different arguments and tolerating other perspectives on them (Alia, 2004) — "a person does not one day just become 'ethical' [...]. Individuals grow ethically just as they grow physically and intellectually" (Merrill, 2011, p. 30).

Many factors can constrain media owners, reporters, editors and journalists from functioning with utmost objectivity and ethical soundness. Journalists may withhold facts due to an individual's right to privacy, injury to some, or to safeguard issues of national interest (Agbese, 2010). The dual status of journalism as a business and a public service in democratic societies has created what Keeble (2001, p. 21) refers to as the "ethical contradictions within the newspaper industry;" a duality in practice that pitches the drive to satisfy a social responsibility against profit interests (Berry, 2008; Christian, 2008; Folarin, 1999; Plotkin, 1996). On the

other hand, Kieran (1997) posits that rigorous compliance with codes of ethics will deny the public pertinent stories. The concern here, however, is that Nigerian professionals are unwilling to apply media ethics in their daily practice. Most obvious and of concern is political partisanship among media organisations, and political colouration of news stories (and fabrication of some) by journalists.

Undoubtedly, from its inception, journalism has been intimately related with politics and governance in Nigeria. Having fought for, contributed to its loss and fought to regain democratic governance, the press in Nigeria now needs to expand the scope of journalism practice, since the mass media and the public no longer have a common foe, the military, but a common cause of ensuring responsible governance and development. This can be achieved through “a press [that] not only informs but involves the audience in debate and facilitates democratic dialogue” (Plotkin, 1996, p. 238). In shunning authoritarian posturing, the Nigerian press can earn public respect through fulfilling a social responsibility of enabling individuals to form their own life worlds and connect with those of others (Schroll, 1999) — enabling many from agrarian backgrounds to integrate into the democratic process and a globalised world. Christians (2008) further reasons:

If societies are moral orders [...] news media are obligated to appeal to democratic citizens about human values. News ought to further a community’s ongoing values clarification by helping people penetrate through the political and economic surface to the moral dynamics underneath. Rather than merely provide readers and audiences with information, the press’s aim is morally literate citizens.

Nnamani (2003), a former state governor, suggests that: “as we have embraced democracy as our socio-political culture [...], it becomes imperative to raise questions on the conduct of the media in the current dispensation.” This call was made due to a seeming inability of mass media owners and associations to bring order to the profession so as to ensure responsible mass media practice. Nonetheless, mass media practice is still characterised with ethical violations and a failure to meet the information needs of society.

Several years after the above call was made, a long standing professional asserts that: “As matters stand, the watch dog has no dog watching over its conduct” (Agbese, 2010, March). Yet, a few months later, by August 2010, “the court granted another perpetual injunction which restrains [...] [from] implementing or otherwise giving effect in any manner whatsoever to provisions of [...] the Nigerian Press Council (Amendment) Decree No. 60 of 1999” (Adebamigbe, 2010). Since the weak-kneed Nigerian Press Council, a government and press jointly instituted organ for regulating journalism practice in Nigeria is now hamstrung, there is no doubt that Nigeria needs to search for a workable ethics code that can effectively guide journalism practice. This paper therefore proffers a road map to developing a viable code of media ethics in Nigeria, after examining ethical violations in the mass media and past attempts to institute journalism codes of ethics.

MEDIA ETHICS VIOLATIONS IN NIGERIA

The mass media were a beacon of hope at times of seeming hopelessness and helplessness in the fight for Nigeria's liberation from colonial and military rules. More recently, the tenure elongation bid by Olusegun Obasanjo was botched, particularly because live broadcasts of National Assembly debates on the issue discouraged conniving legislators from supporting the president. Although little or no journalistic analysis was needed during the broadcasting of the debates, the episode exemplifies the power of mass media in society, to the effect that "when news reaches the general population, it shapes public opinion. When there is a lack of statesmanship, public opinion can force a government to make a decision" (Dallaire, 2007, p. 15) — Olusegun Obasanjo was forced to drop an unpopular constitutional review.

Over the years, journalists' resilience in intimating the public of various Nigerian leaders' intrigues, even under intimidating circumstances, earned the media in Nigeria some measure of press freedom and public respect. The press played critical roles in removing the military "through reporting views of the government's opposers and showing dissatisfaction" (Olayiwola, 1991, p. 37). However, political gains attributable to the Nigerian media are also threatened by unwholesome journalism practice. This view, according to Folarin (1999), is shared by scholars (e.g. Fred Omu) as well as some journalists (e.g. Etim Amin) who perceive that decadence in the press observed during the immediate post-independence period persists, and still poses a serious threat to national development, growth and stability. Observing that major newspapers of the campaigns for the 1953 elections were identified with political parties, Olayiwola (1991) traces unethical practice in the press to the pre-independence period (that is, before 1960): "From colonial era to independence period, to military interregnum, the Nigerian press has been overtly partisan" (p. 34). According to Olayiwola (p. 36), "the leading political party newspapers were not only locked in vicious combat but also, all the media provided remarkable examples of over-zealous, irresponsible partisanship and recklessness." Again, Olayiwola remarks that during the second republic (1979–83), "the media were unable to develop the required ethos of professionalism [...] in reporting political events, national issues, and activities" (p. 40). Thus, press irresponsibility was a critical factor in the fall of the second republic (Olayiwola; Folarin, citing Ike Nwosu).

Despite its history of vibrancy and experience the Nigeria news media of the 21st century are yet to come of age or overcome fundamental encumbrances — many thriving private media organisations are either owned by politicians or aligned with the posturing of particular political parties, and thrive on biased reportage. Moreover, various other factors encourage unethical behaviour, particularly in cases where journalists are armed with identity cards in lieu of a salary, and some fully employed ones may not be paid for upwards of six months (Atoyebi, 2011). The Nigerian press embraces trimmings of journalism that give the profession a bad name in any country. Izeze (2006) and other observers have identified some:

- Information flow and prominence are controlled by people in influential positions, PR practitioners in government parastatals and big companies. Beat associations and news commercialisation (Omenugha & Oji, 2008) facilitate the masking of real voices, and thereby prevent the development of honed professionals capable of generating exclusive stories.
- Beat associations could dictate their terms, “impede access to information and provide a cover for professional misconduct” (Momoh, 2003, p. 151).
- Beat associations, as well as the trade unions which should monitor and enforce media ethics, have established themselves as award-giving bodies.
- Public office holders award contracts to journalists and Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) officials to ensure good press coverage. In fact, some are on the pay rolls of some governors and members of the House of Assembly. Journalists hobnob with politicians, while many print media nurture journalists in line with the owners’ partisan policies.

Further, unknown to their audiences, electronic media organisations render paid-for news as regular news (Omenugha & Oji, 2008). This form of news commercialisation is different from news that sells, or the practice of newspapers matching news coverage of companies with how much ad placement is made in the paper, and from tailoring news to advertisers’ request (WSJ, 1975). “News is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events, it is now about packaged broadcast, or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties” (Omenugha & Oji, p. 14). In the newspapers, “the so called specialized pages of the property, IT and computer businesses and finance pages are prime examples of commercialized spaces” (Omenugha & Oji, p. 16). As Pratt (1988, p. 61) had observed: “journalistic reliance on the government [and other sponsors] constrains any tendency toward the critical presentation and evaluation of news issues and events.” Consequently, genuine and authoritative news is thinned out (Omenugha & Oji), news segments are abused, and distorted and one-sided views on critical issues are presented, etc. leading to the emasculation of journalists and journalism.

Again, inducements, brown envelope syndrome, pressures from individuals, groups and organisations, etc. lead to the publication of rumours, speculations, falsehood (integrity stabbing) and varnished truth (Atoyebi, 2011; Agbese, 2010; Sanusi, 2006; Folarin, 1999). Some journalists sometimes threaten their targets with the publication of unsavoury stories if they fail to pay for stories to be killed (Atoyebi). “Today, journalists are feared for the harm they can do, but not respected for the roles they play in the society” (Atoyebi). Thus, Nnamani (2003) makes the bold statement: “Indeed, it is not for nothing that the question has been extended to include how well, or how much, the Nigerian press is implicated in the civic malaise that permeates society today.”

Another deliberate act that “cannot be said to do credit to the ethical orientations of the editors concerned” (Folarin, 1999, p. 51) is the manipulation of contributions by individuals outside the profession. “Michael Aondoakaa’s frontal attack

on Obasanjo” in the May 11, 2008 edition of *The Guardian* was refuted by the maligned former minister of justice in a later publication of the same paper. However, not many are in a vantage position to refute allegations in the mass media or defend their positions. Selection of what to publish, as well as how to present it, is not always based on the principles of fairness, news balance and news value or in the best interest of society, but rather sometimes on the promotion of hidden ethnic, religious or political agenda. The reporting of Arthur Nzeribe’s attempt to impeach President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2000 — a move considered ill-timed by many — ignored the content of the senator’s bill of impeachment (Ojo, 2003). The print media seemed keen to kill off Nzeribe’s (from the southeast) allegations simply because Mr. President came from the southwest, residence to most of Nigeria’s mass media organisations. Such was also the case during the 2012 fuel subsidy removal crisis, when the mass media chose to demean key players in government (largely from the southern zone of the country), rather than address issues pertinent in redressing a corrupt *modus operandi*. Thus, the press puts religious and ethnic considerations above responsible reporting, often in pandering to the underlying interest of media owners (Ojo).

Ownership determines a media organ’s policy outlook. Broadcast media controlled by respective governments largely serve the interest of the party in government, while privately-owned newspapers and magazines create spaces for political opposition. Readers sympathetic to particular opposition newspapers’ leanings are willingly carried along, but some other readers may be unaware of the papers’ political agenda. Informed viewers and readers are developing apathy towards Nigerian media due to the compromise of the values of good and credible journalism. Ethical misconducts arise as much from disregard of the codes of conduct as from individual journalists not developing an ethical conscience. There is, therefore, the need for ethics education that would enable journalists to develop an attitude of mind that would manifest in good behaviour. Although Izeze (2006) believes that most Nigerian journalists have “latent goodness,” palpable self-regulation by the mass media and individual journalists is a necessity in sustaining a developing democracy and economy like Nigeria, as well as a virile press, in the long run.

SEARCH FOR ACCEPTABLE MEDIA ETHICS THROUGH AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The essence of principles of media ethics is to ensure that professional integrity is the cornerstone of journalism practice. However, despite borrowing from American and British codes of ethics in the design of their own, and even though the codes had undergone modifications at different times, media associations still fail to get their members to submit to the dictates of their codes. The failure to self-regulate has constantly put the Nigerian media in a collision course with the government. Citing Tony Momoh, Agbese (2010) estimates that from colonial times to recent times there had been about eighty laws or regulations designed to constrain the

press. In a bid to muzzle the press, some regimes assaulted journalists and media organisations for publishing what the authority found embarrassing. However, there are indications that government administrations have had justifications for attempting to control the press, as the roles earmarked for the Nigerian Press Council in Decree 31 of 1978 suggest: a) the achievement and maintenance of the highest professional and commercial standards by the Nigerian press, b) review development likely to restrict the supply through the press of information of public interest and importance and advise measures necessary to prevent or remedy such developments; and c) inquire into complaints about the conduct of the press and exercising in respect of the complaints powers conferred under this decree (Agbese, 2010).

Again, even the worst of the decrees suggest ethical violations by the media: Public Officers Protection Against False Accusations Decree Number 11 of 1976 by Mohammed/Obasanjo regime, and the obnoxious Decree Number 4 of 1984, also known as Public Officers Protection Against False Accusation (later abrogated) (Olayiwola, 1991).

In 1968 the federal military government set up a committee to study the problems of the press in Nigeria and make recommendations on press freedom and efficiency (Onuoha, 1995). However, like the 1971 Aliyi Ekinah commission after it, none of the committee's recommendations were implemented. Nigeria was to get her first press council through Decree No. 31 of November 1978. Before the promulgation of the decree, the NPO (Nigerian Press Organization) objected to the composition of, and functions assigned to, the press council. Of the 14-member council, only three, one from each of the three existing press associations, were to be media professionals. Moreover, the tasks of the council would have restricted the rights and privileges of journalists who it was meant to protect (Onuoha). To register its rejection of the decree, the NPO refused to send in nominations to the council; an action that prevented the taking off of the press council.

To further counter the adoption of the Press Council Decree No. 31 of 1978, cleanup its acts, and sustain the independence of the press, the NPO fashioned the 1979 code of ethics to bring honour to the profession. But this was not the first of its kind. Nigeria's search for an acceptable journalism code of ethics had begun in 1955 when the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) was formed. Also, in 1962 the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) drew up its own code during its annual conference (Momoh, 2003). A shortcoming was that the codes did not necessarily originate out of the need to regulate practice, but to satisfy a requirement for registration of a trade union by the Ministry of Labour. The two codes were hardly known by members. Moreover, two separate associations and two codes of ethics controlling one profession were as problematic as the ignorance of their existence by journalists. Therefore, the journalism profession was still in need of a functional code of ethics.

Ten years after the 1978 decree was promulgated, but not enforced, Ibrahim Babangida's military government promulgated the Nigerian Media Council

Decree No. 59 of 1988. In spite of being preceded by several negotiations with media associations, the decree was also rejected because “journalists were a bit apprehensive by the seemingly totalitarian powers conferred on the Council” (Nigerian Press Council, nd — recent online material). However, on December 19, 1992, a 17-member board of the current Nigerian Press Council was inaugurated by the Ibrahim Babangida government. The decree represented a compromise between the NUJ, NGE, NPAN (Newspapers Proprietors’ Association of Nigeria) and the federal government after fruitful discussions between the parties on how to remove the bottlenecks in previous decrees. Nonetheless, there were shortcomings, which however, did not prevent the implementation of NPC Decree No. 85 of 1992. It lasted until 1999 when the federal government introduced some amendments.

In preparation for democratic governance, NPC Decree No. 60 (Amendment) of 1999 attempted to redress the shortcomings of NPC Decree No. 85, but instead of strengthening the Nigerian Press Council, the decree became more contentious, as some of its provisions contradict the provisions of the 1999 constitution and international human rights provisions that guarantee press freedom and freedom of expression. Licensing and registration of journalists as well as requisite punishment for violating provisions of the decree are in conflict with journalists’ rights to freedom of expression as guaranteed in the 1999 constitution, the international convention on civil and Political Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human Rights, to which Nigeria is a signatory (Bako, 2000). The decree is therefore impracticable under a democratic dispensation. Meanwhile, a revised version being pushed for ratification by the house of assembly may be stalled by a court judgement delivered in August 2010 on a lawsuit instituted by NPAN in 1999:

The Federal High Court, Lagos, has ruled that the Nigerian Press Council Decree No. 85 of 1992 — as amended by the Nigeria Press Council (Amendment) Decree No. 60 of 1999 — is unconstitutional, null and void. [...] Liman granted the Nigerian publishers a perpetual injunction, restraining the National Assembly “from treating or continuing to treat the Nigerian Press Council Decree No. 85 of 1992 and the amended Nigerian Press Council (Amendment) Decree No. 60 of 1999 as existing laws deemed to be Acts of the National Assembly.” (Adegbamigbe, *The NEWS* August 2, 2010)

To cite Agbese (2010) again: “As matters stand, the watch dog has no dog watching over its conduct.” Journalists continue to ignore the 1979 code of honour, even after its revision. An editor-in-chief of a newspaper, Etim Anim had provoked a review of the 1979 code of ethics in 1995 (Folarin, 1999), asserting that breaches in the code were engendered by:

1. The breakdown in the social controls that helped to sustain self-regulation
2. The setting up of newspapers as a fad rather than as a business, and
3. The toning down of the standard for recruiting journalists.

Having identified lapses in the code, the press organisations had it reviewed in 1996, ratified in 1998 (NPO, 2009), and put in circulation; yet the code has not made any significant impact on journalists and media organisations. Thus, Agbese (2010) surmises that: “the enactment of the code of ethics by a professional group does not necessarily pave the way for a more honest public service by its members.” Perhaps the environment does not support the institution of media ethics in Nigeria, since according to Hachten and Scotton (2007, p. 17), “a basic tenet [...] is that all press systems reflect the values of the political and economic systems of the nations within which they operate.”

THE ENVIRONMENT OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA ETHICS IN NIGERIA

Journalists defend some of their unethical practices, such as news commercialisation, as an attribute of operating under a harsh and/or corrupt social, economic and political environment (Omenugha & Oji, 2008). From accepting inducement to demanding rewards and payment, some journalists and media organisations use their identity (cards) to overcome absence, poor and irregular salaries, and high cost of production, while satisfying their patrons, particularly the political class and corporate bodies.

Can society be exonerated from media ethics violations? According to Hachten and Scotton (2007, p. 16), “the differing perceptions about the nature and role of journalism and mass communication are rooted in divergent political systems and historical and cultural traditions.” A society that celebrates unverified fame would not raise its voice against the demand and acceptance of gratification to publish a story. Again, a society that accepts a socio-political order that assigns “ownership” of public funds, goods and state-owned media to “government” lets a governor/president to appropriate the airwaves on the principle of “he who pays the piper dictates the tune.” But who really pays the piper — the governor/president, or the people whose public wealth runs the system? By extension, the people have also been hoodwinked into believing that a “responsible” governor or president bestows benevolence on the people by supplying public good. Thus, government media are organs for extolling the virtues of incumbent governors and president (and their wives), and “silencing” other voices — the voices of other politicians and other happenings in society are usually unheard of. The governor leads the news, and without his presence, far-flung places may not come up for mention in news reports.

The deprivation of a “voice” by the colonial government which refused him access to its radio forced Obafemi Awolowo to establish the first television station in Africa. Today, since state-owned mass media fail to serve the entire public information needs, those politicians who can afford it, establish newspapers. Thus, a crucial step to curbing media ethical violations is making public property public — the public needs to change its views about government and control of public property and wealth.

THE ROADMAP TO WORKABLE MEDIA ETHICS

The inability of the mass media to integrate citizens into social, political and economic systems over the years constitutes a deficiency in journalism practice. A paradigmatic shift from information provision as benevolence to a philosophy of stewardship must be considered. If Ferré's (2009, p. 26) observation is accepted, that "citizens in a democracy usually get the media they deserve," because citizens, academics and practitioners participate in media ethics discourse as a democratic enterprise, it would be appreciated that responsible journalism (or stewardship) is yet to be negotiated in Nigeria, where democracy is still in its infancy. As an institution in a developing country, the press would be rife with its own measure of underdevelopment, whose impact on a budding nation would be minimised if the press is properly regulated. The press must be willing to submit itself to control from within and from without the profession.

Journalists have so far performed poorly in drawing the public into discourses that address development needs at all levels. The media needs to:

1. create a civic forum encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs;
2. act as a watch dog against the abuse of power; and
3. serve as a mobilising agent, encouraging public learning and participation in the political process (Nnamani, 2003 citing Pippa Norris).

To ensure that the fourth estate of the realm is not repressive or divisive, does not oppress (or pander to the dictates of) leaders, and will not engender conflict among the governed, journalism practice should be guided by regulations situated on a tripod — journalists, media owners and society.

Responsible journalists are made

Journalists should serve public information needs within the laws of the land regarding oral and written text expression and publication, avoiding defamation, libel, piracy, violation of other copyright issues, etc. In addition, they should be able to judge the public value of news and opinions (McManus, 1997), and responsibly render delicate issues with sensitivity, rather than with sensation. According to Plotkin (1996), journalists become good by applying reasoning, compiling experiences and being ethical as they dedicatedly uncover, analyze and present information. Merrill (1975) similarly describes the virtuous journalist as one who pursues truth and applies wisdom, courage, temperance and justice appropriately.

Did Marie Colvin, French photographer Remi Ochlik and other journalists killed in Syrian civilian bombings in 2012 apply wisdom? The British Prime Minister David Cameron observes: "This is a desperately sad reminder of the risks that journalists take to inform the world of what is happening [...]" (*Sky News*, 2012). In the bid to show the world, with graphic evidence, that an endangered portion of humanity was trapped in Syria — as Roméo Dallaire would agree — Marie Colvin

“believed profoundly that reporting could curtail the excesses of brutal regimes and make the international community take notice” (Stableford, 2012 quoting John Witherow). Colvin was quoted as saying “Our mission is to report these horrors of war with accuracy and without prejudice” (Osborn, 2012, emphasis ours). Unpalatable as Colvin’s experience may be, it illustrates the need to make public interest the driving force of journalism practice. The journalists did not wish to force their stories on the public, but rather sought to use prevalent occurrence to convince society of the erosion of humanness. According to Alia (2004),

Journalism is ethical to the extent that it tells as much truth as possible. It avoids ethnocentric bias that skews truth telling, and includes a range of observation that provides a context for the “factual” information reported about people and events. (p. 22)

If ethics is personally determined and personally enforced (Merrill, 1975), it follows that it is the empowered journalist that can make right decisions. Empowerment goes beyond a code of ethics; a code of ethics is as good as a journalist is capable of applying it. Journalists can go to such lengths and sensitivity in judgment as their training, belief about their responsibility to the public and about what their journalistic practice entails or permits. Thus, Merrill says that ethics “has to do with duty, with following formalistic rules, principles, or maxims” (2011, p. 11); and that “What he communicates is in a very real way what he himself is” (1975, p. 8). Further, Pratt’s (1988) assertion that ethics is an acquired habit of the intellect suggests that a person’s ethical judgement can be limited by education and exposure (experience). In addition, in order to exercise moral judgement without bias, Nigerian journalists require adequate preparation in cultural communication and critical thinking skills to function adequately in a multi-ethnic setting as Nigeria. Taken together, the Bible injunction aptly captures Dallaire’s appeal to journalists:

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding (Proverb 4: 7).

[...] get yourselves a lot more cultured, learn some geography, some anthropology, some sociology and maybe even some philosophy. Bring more depth to your questions and to your analysis. And stay dynamic in your search for the truth, for you are an instrument of the absolute called “justice.” If you abdicate or if you are perfunctory, then we will all be weakened. (Dallaire, 2007, p. 19)

We suggest that certain factors predispose journalists to applying ethical reasoning, such as:

1. concepts of self, self and others, and responsibility to society;
2. level of education and extent of professional development. Journalists require training in ethics: “the study of what we ought to do” (Merrill 2011, p. 3);
3. awareness that sound judgement is expected;
4. extent of growth in journalism reporting in a given context (for example, what medical or legal information can be published); and

5. consciousness of the overriding concern when generating stories (for example, is it to demean/eulogise an individual, people, political party, government, etc.).

Capability and dedication in developing desirable ethical principles may be determinants of whether a journalist hopes to develop them in the first place or not. Journalists who are politically and financially corrupt (Omenugha & Oji, 2008) have no scruples about certain behaviour and will care less about moral issues in journalism practice.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MEDIA OWNERS AND ORGANISATIONS

The extent to which journalists can be in charge of what they publish has been declining, particularly due to media ownership. While conglomeration results in the protection of sibling companies in developed countries, media owners' interests control the nature and characteristic of media output in Nigeria. According to McManus (1997, p. 12), "newsroom surveys show a strong trend toward declining journalistic autonomy," and editors may not be ultimately in charge of news stories angle and emphasis. Therefore, the journalist is no longer "individually responsible for his or her actions" (Pratt, 1988, p. 49). This contradicts press freedom.

Protected by law to provide an open forum for discussion, press units are obliged to devote themselves to disclosing and distributing truth, allowing citizens to make better decisions and more effectively govern themselves. Commitment to truth must spring from a sense of duty in which people are respected as ends rather than as means to ends. (Plotkin, 1996, pp. 240–241)

McManus (1997) cites several studies that show that many acts in violation of codes of ethics are influenced from outside the newsroom. He established that placing the burden of responsible and ethical journalism on media organisations' employees is inadequate, if not misplaced, since the target of ethical codes cannot make decisions for owners. Drawing attention to the erosion of journalistic autonomy, McManus calls for a searchlight to be beamed on media owners, their business-patrons and others that influence journalistic judgement: "A fundamental principle of ethics is that those with the greatest power bear the greatest moral accountability, a journalist's ethical codes have it backward" (p. 13). Although news stories do not bear their names, media owners are obviously major sources and causes of ethical violations, and therefore can reverse the trend.

In the case of Nigeria, politics is critical in journalism practice, and media owners determine the plank on which political news stories are determined. Olayiwola (1991) maintains that:

the fact of ownership is not only the key which determines how the mass media are used for moulding the citizen's perception of political reality in the country, but [that] it is also a more precise means of understanding and investigating the role of the press in political stability or instability, national integration or disintegration. (p. 31)

Indeed, there is evidence that some organisations are set up for political reasons, as is apparent in the case of *Compass*:

Nigeria Union of Journalists [...] visited the *Compass* Newspaper [...] over the non-payment of salaries to sacked workers. The newspaper's fortune went into a tailspin after its owner, former governor, Gbenga Daniel, was indicted for corruption last year shortly after he left office as governor of Ogun state. (*Sahara Reporter*, 2012)

From a different perspective, owners of mass media organisations may lack understanding of the intricacies of the profession; which may result in poor perception of a media organisation's responsibility towards society. Another factor is the possession of financial muscle to run a media organisation independently — if *Compass* had established itself in the communication market it should have been able to continue with normal operation, since Gbenga Daniel would not have necessarily been in charge of the daily running of the organisation while governing a state. Perhaps *Compass* was not necessarily self-sustaining as a media organ while it flourished.

Taken together, these ethical violations can be linked to ownership:

- Papers at the mercy of advertisers (politicians and political groups);
- Personal and business considerations allowed to flavour news;
- Payment of low or no salaries to workers (ID card journalism);
- Tolerance of staff practices that are not conducive to editorial independence and objectivity; so long as journalists contribute to the financial well-being of the organisation, e.g. beat associations and plagiarism
 - News blackout to protect, or for fear of, individuals or groups;
 - Blackout of crucial positive news and down-playing of achievements of those (political leaders or groups) opposed by the paper; and
 - Encouragement of junketing, with the effect that news stories lack objectivity.

For example, several uncompleted or undone development projects are commissioned, and journalists fail to expose their true states of affairs (uncompleted), since they are ferried to venues and entertained by government event organisers (sometimes with “transport money” to boot). There are indications that media organisations and journalists see nothing wrong with enjoying privileges from those they are watching.

To discourage ethical violations, mass media owners pay healthy salaries so that employees are less susceptible to bribes and favours (WSJ, 1975). Therefore, only individuals/organisations with sound financial footing need establish media business. Existing media organisations can consider merging, or adoption by companies that can finance responsible journalism. Further, regulatory bodies and media associations should work out minimum standards for establishing and operating a media organisation, including regular payment of workers' salaries. Otherwise, journalists will continue to perceive journalism principles as grandiose philosophising. On the other hand, healthy salaries will attract to the profession individuals with sound qualifications.

Moreover, journalists, owners and managers should be kept abreast of development in society and about international best practices through regular training. The implementation of outcomes of conferences and workshops can be managed and monitored by committees, to increase owners' capability to define and apply sound ethical principles in their daily practice. Agbese (2010) avers that those in journalism practice must be better informed than the public they serve, and sharpen their editorial judgment. Additionally, a mass media association is worth its onions if it can caution its members and discipline ethical noncompliance.

Responsible journalism need not be anti-government, but pro-society and supportive of development. Consequently, to ensure wider access, print media owners should seek government support in cutting the cost of production and distribution, since media products are important for information dissemination, promotion of literacy among Nigerians, and national development. An antagonistic press that is already enjoying constitutional cover is unlikely to attract a government's ear or legislative action in the areas of tariff waiver on newsprint, resuscitation of the moribund national newsprint company, and reduction or removal of taxes, in addition to other supports required to make cultural products available to all.

SOCIETY'S RESPONSIBILITY IN SHAPING MEDIA PRACTICE

The level of Nigerian mass media products consumption is lower than affordability level because 21st century Nigerians are more perceptive and more discerning than before (Schroll, 1999) — newspapers are no longer considered credible sources of truth. The low value attached to media products implies that Nigerians do not significantly appropriate “the content of the news and apply[ing] that knowledge in constructive interactions with others in democratic regimes” (Schroll, 1999, p. 321). An efficient press fosters dialogue in community as it also performs its watchdog function (Plotkin, 1996; Dixon, 1997).

Communitarianism takes the problem away from merely being a clash between press and government and transforms it into a search for appropriate, productive means of setting out the rights and responsibilities of the journalist in terms of the community being served. (Dixon, 1997, p. 181)

On the other hand, good citizens actively seek for news. Schroll (1999, p. 321) avers that:

Reading and interpreting the news, as well as interacting with others, contribute to the constitution of an individual's life world and allows one to form and take steps to maintain connections among the life worlds of others. It also helps the citizen apprehend the “system” of modern democratic bureaucracy more fully.

Thus, in guiding public discourses, the truth cannot be compromised, and astute news judgment is a necessity. Nonetheless, an ideal journalism–public relationship

should be a joint responsibility of the mass media and the public. Therefore, the public has a role to play in shaping media products and media ethics in a given society. Consequently, “ethical readership” as propounded by Schroll (1999) would result from the consuming public actively participating in the regulation of the media practice.

A process of designing acceptable code of ethics for the Nigerian mass media can be set-off by the house of assembly inviting mass media organisations and all relevant groups to deliberate on the issue. This should be preceded by public debates in different forums to sensitive society on the importance of ethical journalism in a developing economy with much ethnic diversity. An act based on the outcome of such deliberations would not be seen as government constricting press freedom.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian press’s resistance of every attempt to restrict its freedom should have been accompanied with self-regulation and dedication to contributing optimally to national development. A democratic dispensation affords journalists and media organisation owners a liberated mindset required to foster self-regulation than was possible in non-democratic dispensations. Responsible and ethical journalism will preserve achievements attributable to the press and improve the integrity of the profession. They must see their responsibility as that towards the public and the protection of the interest of the larger public rather than the few that seek self-aggrandisement through the inherent influence of the mass media.

The mass media should lead Nigerians to contribute to debates on politics, preservation of cultural norms, family values, etc.; and should request/accept society’s response to what is broadcast or published. Viewers must have a say on what is beamed to their homes, including pictures in many musicals shown on Nigerian television. Lind and Rarick (1992) found that viewers want to have an input in what is aired, also by way of rating programmes and recommending their placement. Responsible broadcasting takes cognisance of societal norms as well as preparedness for certain genres. Therefore, pressures from citizens’ group have led to many changes and public input in the programming, content and management of aspects of media practices in other climes (see Dominick, 2002, pp. 451–453).

A pervasive problem in journalistic practice anywhere is bias in reporting. Similarly, although the media are positioned to inform the public, they actually “do much to distort and hide the significance of daily events” (Cunningham, 1993, p. 152) for many reasons outside the interest of the consuming public. The growing public dissatisfaction with the media should draw the attention of relevant departments in academic and journalism institutions to media issues and media ethics (Cunningham; Nnamani, 2003; Pratt, 1988). Getting journalists to appreciate

principles of media ethics (and Nigerian ethics) requires continuous training in professional and philosophical approaches to interpreting phenomena in society. Increased awareness would lead to identifying a person's ethical orientation (for example, absolutist ethics or responsibility ethics) and to so deploy journalists — a journalist that leans towards absolute value ethics should do creditably well as an investigative reporter, while one leaning towards responsibility ethics would excel in interpretative reporting (Folarin, 1999).

Umbrella bodies will be persuaded to enforce close monitoring of their members if a legal framework that actually makes serious offenders pay penalties, say for misinformation, false or damaging publications, is enforced. A more worthy step is for the managements of media organisations to clearly define their missions, design their own codes of ethics from subsisting ones and promote compliance among all employees, and thereby reduce ignorance about codes of ethical conduct and acceptable professional practices.

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