

Ethical Implications of Information Dissemination on the New Media

Damian Amana

Lecturer Department of Mass Communication at the kogi state university, Anyigba
amanadamian@yahoo.com

Innocent Oyibo (PhD)

Lecturer Department of Philosophy and Religious studies at the kogi state university, Anyigba
Innocentoyibo@yahoo.com

Abstract

The concept of new media poses from the start a problem of nomenclature, in what does it consist? Unlike the radio or Television where proximity of mater and form provides for an ease of classification, the new media consist rather of loosely related technologies in terms of form but strongly differentiated in terms of mater. The new media “are in fact a disparate set of communication technologies that share *only* certain features...they are very diverse and not easy to define.” The problem of nomenclature with regards to the new media underscores the problem of classification and control. From a comparative analysis of varied characters of the new medium that are classified under the new media, the paper xrays the problem of assurance of quality information with regards to the new media in a growing ambit of fragmentation and decimation of the audience, source, and recipient under the new media regime. In the perceived throes of the difficulty of assurance, the paper postulates and recommends a teaching and training of the modern generation of peoples towards a stronger ethical living as necessary salve to the perturbing problem of lack of control of the new media.

Introduction

The past few years have witnessed the unprecedented explosion of Information and Communication Technologies birthing a new media *sitz-im-leben*. It is worth noting at the onset that though the nomenclature of new media is nebulous due to the absence of uniformity in the materials classified under the notion, some characteristics however run across the plethora of the new media.

Characteristically, most new media provides an ‘on demand access to contents anytime, anywhere on a digital device’ (Vogt, 2011:17). The level of interactivity on the new media far exceeds any anticipated in the traditional mass media. On the new media, every consumer is at once a creator of media text and a consumer of cultural symbols. McQuail (2010:137) argues that one of the most significant aspects of the new media is digitalization. Same McQuail highlights the fact that the new media ‘transgresses the limits of the print and broadcasting models,’ it permits many to many conversations, it provides for a simultaneity of reception, alterations and redistribution ‘of cultural symbolic objects.’

The depth of penetration of the new media in society is simply staggering. It is on record that in developed countries like America as at 2011, the average American spends about “66hours per month on the computer. Facebook lovers spend by average, 700 billion minutes on the site each month. YouTube visitors watch over 2 billion videos every day” (Vogt, 2011:18).

The arrival of Web 2.0 concepts and new media technologies have greatly changed the face of society. Millions of people around the globe, through social networking (internal, external, or mobile), are recently building online local, regional, and global communities to communicate their shared interests and activities, disseminate information, and interact through a variety of web-based tools. The use of new media and social networks (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter etc.) have implications for society, culture and politics. Amongst many, the new media has brought to reality in the fibre of culture the democratization of information packaging and distribution.

The new digital media is a frontier that is rich with opportunities and risks, particularly for young people. They have given rise to information explosion but also to information pollution and as Baudrillard (2004:79) would argue, to information implosion. Through digital technologies, young people are participating in a range of activities, including social networking, blogging, gaming, instant messaging, downloading music and other content, uploading and sharing their own creations, and collaborating with others in various ways.

However, the new media possess an immense challenge with regards to necessary censorship in the moderation of media symbols and contents. The ubiquity of the new media and the absence of the necessary gatekeepers create an ethical vacuum within the societal system of media surveillance. With a mobile phone in hand coupled with the ease of the production of media text on the mobile platform, every man and every woman is basically a potential freelance reporter, however the veracity of the content remains an ethical question.

The traditional mass media have a wide range of system of checks and balance. When the reporter

returns from the field, his or her work passes through the correcting crucible of the news editor, the sub-editor, the proof reader, the editor-in-chief and the editorial board meeting before reaching the public. It is highly uncommon for the reporters' work to pass from his or her pen directly to the public for consumption. The range of news gatemens helps to better the lot of the work. The new media on the other hand provides for a direct dissemination of information to the public without any other person correcting it. It is possible too, for the writer to publish on the new media without the painstaking practice of editing his or her work.

While it was relatively easy to locate the publisher of a piece of information on the mass media and allot responsibility for any careless slander or libel or seditious publication, the new media presents a mystery maze so that authorship responsibility becomes difficult.

Statement of the problem

The new digital media have ushered in a new and essentially unlimited borderless frontier. Frontiers are open spaces: they often lack comprehensive and well enforced rules and regulations and thus harbor both tremendous promises and significant perils. The pervasiveness of indecent content, which was once disseminated locally, has become, with the development of the Internet, an issue of national and international concern (Hillard 2007:1).

The rise of new media and online journalism are affecting the traditional journalistic standards of objectivity, accuracy, and verification. Mahmoud Eid and Shephard Ward in their Editorial to the *Global Media Journal* (2009:1) have observed thus:

“The growth of new media means that journalism ethics is undergoing a difficult transition from a traditional, professional ethics to a mixed media ethics. Both professional journalists and citizen journalists struggle to reinvent media ethics and debate whether and how to adapt existing norms, such as accuracy, verification and objectivity, to the new media environment”.

Hence, a question arises: How can information dissemination on the new media portend the old practice of an objective and factual reportage? In a postmodern culture that denies any fixed essences (Hedges, 2010: 167), in a postmodern society where the boundaries of nations are no longer water tight as they used to be, in a scenario where the necessary gatekeepers that once censored the quality of information are no longer feasible, does the old ethical principle enshrined in an earlier media culture holds sway? What kind of ethics would therefore safeguard society from peril in this new public sphere?

Habermas (1991:123) highlighted the implications of the new public sphere in his *Structural transformation of the public sphere*. For Habermas, specific historical environment of the 18 century gave rise to the nature of the civic society that existed therewith. A prevalent nature of the society is the crave for an arena of open and free exchange of ideas about society and polis itself. If the logic of Habermas is applied to the current circumstances of present day culture, the new media among many other ICTs have and are ushering into the ecology of culture, a new way of relating with little gate keeping presence.

Due to the new public sphere occasioned by the employment of the new media in cultural life, this paper explores the ethical fault lines that are raised by such digital interconnectivity with little knob for censorship. The five key issues at stake in the new media include—identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation. With the growing collapse of frontiers and the death of gatekeepers, the inadvertent presence of the media in private life, in a situation where all and sundry are producers of media text, how credible would be the information available and how can information credibility be promoted? Drawing on evidence from informant interviews, emerging scholarship on new media, and theoretical insights from media analysis, sociology, and cultural studies, this paper explores the ways in which youth are redefining these five concepts as they engage with the new digital media. In an ineluctable environment of defeated censorship, it does portend in the face of an ever weakening moral environment with regards to the dissemination and consumption of information, the clarion call for the promotion of a stronger self administered ethics of self control and critical consumption of information.

Ethics: a definition

The term ‘ethics’ is as controversial as motley of other moral issues. Scholars hardly agree on one single concept with the consequence that each concept takes on various shades of interpretation (Chari, 2009:46). The word “ethics” is however connected intrinsically with questions of correct conduct within society. Etymologically, “ethics” comes from the Greek “ethos” meaning “character” which indicates a concern for virtuous people, reliable character and proper conduct. An initial definition of ethics, then, is the analysis, evaluation, and promotion of correct conduct and/or good character, according to the best available standards (Ward, 2012:2). Ethics are moral principles of conduct which guide our behavior. They are rules of conduct or principles of morality that point towards the right or the best way to act in a situation.

A central aspect of ethics is "the good life", the life worth living or life that is satisfying, which is held by many philosophers to be more important than moral conduct.

Ethics try to develop overarching frameworks, or theories, that can make sense of --what is good is what promotes happiness for all, what is good is whatever our society approves of, or what is good is whatever I desire and what is bad, that can destroy society and social cohesion. Hence, ethics proceeds by trying to systematize our morals, by identifying the themes that run through our moral judgments.

Ethics presupposes the capacity or thinking in abstract terms about the implications of a given course of action or one's self, group, profession, community, nation, and world. For example, "I am a reporter. What are my rights and responsibilities?" or "I am a citizen of Nigeria. What are my rights and responsibilities?" Ethical conduct is closely aligned with the responsibilities to and for others that are attached to one's role in a given context.

Ward succinctly summarizes what ethics essentially does: "Ethics asks what we should do in some circumstance, or what we should do as participants in some form of activity or profession. Ethics is not limited to the acts of a single person. Ethics is also interested in the correct practices of governments, corporations, professionals and many other groups. To these issues, ethics seeks a reasoned, principled, position" (Ward, 2012:3). Applied to the ethical question of the new media environment, ethics asks the question what moral principles ought to guide the conduct of information dissemination on the new media?

Philosophical foundations of ethics in media

Throughout the ages, philosophers and others have presented their ethical theories, which are meant both to capture and to correct our moral judgments. However, the absence of universally agreed moral standards as Chari (2009: 47) poignantly observes makes media ethics such a hotly contested terrain. "Journalists operating in different jurisdictions and cultural contexts emphasize different values. For instance, a journalist in the United States of America may place more attention on individual freedom while one in a developing country may feel duty bound to respect the collective interests of the community in which he or she lives."

Thus, Christians (1983:9ff) identifies five ethical principles which have historically been drawn upon for moral decisions. These are:

- 1) Aristotle's Golden Mean: This principle rests on the assumption that virtue lies between two extremes. Thus, a morally upright journalist is neither the one who is a coward nor bashful. Aristotle emphasizes moderation for the appropriate actions. Aquinas further elaborated on this concept when he defines his theory of the middle ground: *virtu medio est*.
- 2) Emmanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative: "Act on that maximum by which you will to become a universal law". This principle emphasizes that 'what is right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions'. If, for example, a journalist is convinced that publishing a particular story is the right thing then he or she must go ahead and not mind the consequences.
- 3) Mills Principle of Utility otherwise known as Utilitarianism according to Christians (2007:113) has dominated media ethics for a century. This philosophical strand predicted on the premise that man must 'seek greatest happiness for the greatest number'. In other words, what is right is that which pleases the greatest number of people in a nation. Christians observes that this ethical view is widespread in American society.
- 4) John Rawl's Veil of Ignorance: 'Justice in the view of Rawls emerges when negotiating without social differentiation'. This principle rests on Rawl's principle that fairness is a fundamental tenet of justice. In a sense, justice is viewed as a 'cloistered virtue' which is blind to social status, colour or creed. All people must be treated fairly without fear or favour. Being morally blind means that the media do not treat the powerful in society as sacred cows. All creatures, great and small ought to be subjected to the same moral standards.
- 5) The Judeo-Christian perspective on Morality focuses on Persons as Ends: This "love your neighbor as yourself" principle views all human beings as standing under one moral virtue. Love is viewed as more than a raw principle, stern and unconditional (Christians, 1983:16). The unconditional love due to humanity makes it immoral for anyone to use human beings for the purpose of achieving certain ends. Loving one's neighbor is a practical action that entails helping those who need help such as the weak, the poor, orphans, widows, aliens, the disenfranchised and the downtrodden in society. This principle exhorts media practitioners to use their privilege to highlight the plight of the poor and needy in society (Chari 2009: 47ff).

The aforementioned five foundations give impetus to the ethical argumentations between teleology, deontology, relativist, absolutist, situational, universalistic, subjectivist, objectivistic, legalistic and antinomian as guide for the journalistic ethical decisions.

Ethics in Journalism and Media

Media ethics is the subdivision of applied ethics dealing with the specific ethical principles and standards of media, including broadcast media, film, theatre, the arts, and print media and now the new media whose most

visible medium has been the internet and its cousins: the social networks. Ethical codes do more than reflect and codify what is moral, immoral or amoral. They establish a higher standard of responsible journalism.

With the gradual waning of the authoritarian societies of the Tudors of England, the Bourbons in France, the Re di Roma, the Hapsburg of Spain, and Journalism entered the realm of libertarianism with the clamor for the free market of ideas. The 17th century English writer John Milton in his *Areopagita* (1964:4ff) postulated the concept of the “open market of ideas and the self-righting process”. In his work, Milton advocated the freedom of expression, of ideas, opinions etc, and good ideas will surely face out the bad ones. Thomas Paine’ in his *Right of man* held that “every man not intending to mislead, but seeking to enlighten others.... However erroneously, may address himself to the universal reason of the whole man.” John Erskine, the 18th century writer reinforced the theory of Paine. John Stuart Mill emphasized the call for liberty in his declaration that : “if we silence an opinion, for all we know, we are silencing truth... a wrong opinion may contain a grain of truth necessary for finding the whole truth.” Mill added that the stifling of liberty of expression is stealing from the public (Amana, 2011:16). The dawning of the free press quickly degenerated into yellow journalism. This led inevitably to the Hutchins commission and the birth of the social responsibility call. It is thus right to argue that too much freedom of access and production of media text also holds the potency of the banalization of information dissemination, could the same type of situation be replicated in the new mediated age of easy access to and participatory production of media text?

Sequel to the social responsibility call, Journalism saw the birth and multiplication of ethical codes from the 1952 international journalistic ethics of UNESCO, the 1986 WAJA charter, the Nigerian press organization code of 2979.

For those working with newspapers or magazines, in radio or TV, there are some well-established rules to follow when making ethical decisions. The Code of Principles which was adopted by the International Federation of Journalists almost 70 years ago is a brief and inclusive statement about ethics in journalism. It is universal. It has been endorsed by unions and associations of journalists coming from vastly different cultures and traditions. From Japan to Colombia, Russia to the Congo, Canada to Malaysia, the United States to Iran, it brings together hundreds of thousands of journalists under a global standard for media quality. Therein, the highest ethical value is Truth: “Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist” (White, 2008: ii). The first attempts to articulate the rights and responsibilities of journalists which form the basis for modern notions of ethical journalism were made more than 150 years ago.

John Thaddeus Delane in February 1852, underlined the cardinal principle of truth-telling: “The duty of the journalist is the same as that of the historian — to seek out the truth, above all things, and to present to his readers the truth as he can attain it.” (White, 2008: 23).

There are traditional approaches to addressing questions of accuracy in print or balance on the air. The one thing the traditional journalists to some extent have is a defined line of gauging journalistic content and credibility. The traditional mass media system have a reputation for being objective, for checking their sources and being a credible source. This is due to the ethical obligations that they must all subscribe to.

But the Internet is relatively new and so are all the new media. There are no guideposts, no traditions, no defined ethical standards to abide by. The medium makes room for a mess when it comes to ethical dilemmas on the web. White (2008: 30) expresses this dilemma succinctly thus:

“But ‘news’ on the Internet of course goes far beyond media sites. It is a jostling noisy market place where every shape of opinion has a voice and where exotic information of all kinds is on display. But how is it possible to tell what is true and what are lies, or wishful thinking? Is the latest conspiracy theory the work of fantasists or the exposure of a cover-up? The Internet surfer has no guide to this bazaar full of shouting voices, and must rely on their own ability to judge fact from fiction and to find reliability and consistency”.

If journalistic accuracy and credibility are not to be diminished then the journalistic core values must have to move also in the realm of the new media. To allow a diminution of values online such as accuracy, credibility, balance, accessibility, news judgment, and leadership would be to risk undermining the good name—and the economic value—of the mother ship but this is the problem that new media informatics brings to the fore.

However, would the “old” values and “new” medium be a smooth fit? That remains debatable. As dedicated to principle as journalists might be, the Internet provided so many opportunities to do things differently that any adherence to traditional approaches would be called into question. In a medium built for speed and participation, for instance, should the old standards of completeness and accuracy be exactly the same as they were for a print world? Even if the answer were yes, how those standards could be imposed and lived is open to debate. The most practical question of all is obvious: How can any standards and values be effectively attached to a moving target—particularly one moving as fast as the Internet?

There are however, two opposing views on new media and journalism ethics. On one side, professional

journalists tend to argue that new media undermine professional ethics. Bloggers flout the rules, in turn putting more pressure on journalists to rush stories out and take less care in sourcing stories and policing conflicts of interest.

For professional journalists the solution to the problem is to tighten up: update the journalism codes and apply them to new media and as for the bloggers, try to include the best of these imposters in the professional fold, and teach them how to work like the professionals.

On the other hand the bloggers and tweeters argue that the new media are developing their own ethical systems based on distributed intelligence and the wisdom of crowds. The proposition that new media come with new ethics, is not less ethics, and that 'journalistic professional ethics' have always been a bit of a myth anyway because it has remained at best subjectively impelled.

The debate has at times descended into an exchange of insults: Established journalists say the bloggers have no standards and are responsible for spreading lies and insults. And on the other hand bloggers and citizen journalists roll their eyes and point to the latest scandal involving 'so called professional journalists' and failures of 'so called self-regulation.' Of course, neither of these groups is entirely right, but they each have a point.

Challenges to ethics in the New Media

Digital media do offer new challenges, in large part because anyone with a modem or even smart phone can now practice journalism with little oversight or professional vetting. "A media revolution is transforming, fundamentally and irrevocably, the nature of journalism and its ethics" (Ward, 2012:12).

Deception is high on the list of things that can happen in the new media environment. There is need to pay close attention to how messages are distributed and the target audience. This could apply to everything from blogs to podcasts to wikis, even on Web sites. Making sure we disclose who we're working for is imperative, especially in the new media. Journalism on the new media is also more immediate and interactive. The pressure to publish quickly can more easily lead to mistakes or the harming of others.

The issue of reputation management is another ethical dilemma. Some people use social media to damage or ruin the reputation of a company or person. Managing a virtual attack on reputation is a real dilemma in a world where so many different sources of information are available on the Internet.

Inaccurate information that is disseminated through new media by sources that are not credible or ethical can cause a lot of harm. The new social media are like the Wild Wild West of our time. Unfortunately, target audiences may believe this inaccurate information, which can be very damaging to peace and social cohesion in the polity. The business incentives to chase a mass audience can lower standards, including news judgment.

One other challenge is identifying the person or institution responsible for ethical issues of the new media: the question of authorship remains a big dilemma because of pseudonyms and identities. Anonymity is accepted more readily online than in mainstream news media. It encourages irresponsible and harmful comments. Above all, who should dictate the rule of utility, is it the teacher, parent, government and even technology in manufacturer who defines and enforces the ethical use of information in the new set up?

Reports and images circulate the globe with amazing speed via Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, blogs, cell phones, and email. Speed puts pressure on newsrooms to publish stories before they are adequately checked and verified as to the source of the story and the reliability of the alleged facts. Major news organizations too, often pick up rumors online. Sometimes, the impact of publishing an online rumor is world shaking like the issue of a false report that a hockey coach has been fired. But a media that thrives on speed and "sharing" creates the potential for great harm. For instance, news organizations might be tempted to repeat a false rumor that terrorists had taken control of the London subway, or that a nuclear power plant had just experienced a 'meltdown' and dangerous gases were blowing towards Chicago. These false reports could induce panic, causes- accidents; prompt military action and so on.

A related problem, created by new media, is how to handle errors and corrections when reports and commentary are constantly being updated. Increasingly, journalists are blogging 'live' about sports games, news events, and breaking stories. Inevitably, when one works at this speed, errors are made, from misspelling words to making factual errors. Should news organizations go back and correct all of these mistakes which populate mountains of material? Or should they correct errors later and not leave a trace of the original mistake –what is called "unpublishing?"

The ethical challenge is to articulate guidelines for dealing with rumors and corrections in an online world that are consistent with the principles of accuracy, verification, and transparency.

New media encourages people to express their opinion and share their thoughts candidly. However, dangers inhere in them. Many bloggers take pride in speaking their mind, compared to any mainstream reporters who must cover events impartially. Many online journalists see themselves as partisans or activists for causes or political movements, and reject the idea of objective or neutral analysis.

Partial or partisan journalism comes in at least two kinds: One kind is an opinion journalism that enjoys

commenting upon events and issues, with or without verification. Another form is partisan journalism which uses media as a mouthpiece for political parties and movements.

The coming of technology has hugely upset subtle communication structures and protocols in Africa. Firstly, technology tends to empower the individual rather than the community. Mobile phones are owned and operated by individuals. Prior to this scenario, there used to be the family phone and the family post office number or letter box. The radio now is a personal gadget since it can be accessed on the phone and online by individuals. The challenge here is how to ensure ethical use of the “individualized information systems”. The challenge is to construct an ethics for this new area of journalism.

In the presence of the sweeping changes and challenges occasioned by the new media, what should be done with regards to ethics of journalism?

Proposals

In the US, some independent news bloggers have begun to set their own standards. Even more promising, schools have begun to teach students how to use information on the Internet, sifting truth from falsehoods and distortions.

Professionals who put blogs together are also using new media. So, at least from that perspective, the ethics that had hitherto bounded on them should move on with them into the cyberspace.

A strong presence of mediating adults and peers leads to a strong tendency to self-regulation in the games children play.

But above all, a stronger culture of responsibility is a *conditio-sine-qua-non*. Special focus of attention and pedagogy should be directed towards the youth using information technologies (eg mobile phones will not be used for Intellectual Property, Privacy, Decency, objectivity, truth, balance etc.

We must prohibit mischief- hacking and other Internet crime. Kids need to be taught Information Ethics at formative stages so that they could grow with “filters in the head” that help them differentiate between right and wrong online. The entry point and entry age is very important for success in teaching Information Ethics. It is critical that children are taught Information Ethics on new media at places where they first access it.

CONCLUSION

An attempt to control a student misusing the online facility could easily be repulsed by a claim to rights of privacy. Writing on the concerns of the growing information space, Holtzman says; “one of our society’s great challenges will be to figure out how to create a balance between harms and benefits offered by global access to universal information” (Holtzman, 2006:69). When used appropriately, the new media promotes learning and research. But they could also be misused, often inadvertently by the users resulting in the compromising of their privacy, fraud and even harm to children by pedophiles.

If one chooses the line of ethics to suggest for the new media, it hardly bears fruit as ethics is and is best administered as a personal affair. Hence the need in the society that ethics be thought and imbibed in various realms of life in the state is paramount for an ethical information packaging and dissemination on the new media.

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