

# Buttressing the Need for Ethical Guidance for Online Reporting in Nigeria

Edith U. Ohaja

Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

## Abstract

There is a rapid growth in mobile Internet data subscription in Nigeria and an accompanying proliferation of online news outlets hoping to cash in on the attendant lucrative business potentials. This study is informed by the worrisome activities of these online reporting platforms. The study is an analytical discourse enriched with examples derived from a qualitative reading of relevant online news reports and interactions with some online reporters in Nigeria's North Central, North West, South West and South South geo-political zones under the auspices of a National Orientation Agency project. The study examines benefits and ethical violations noticeable in online reporting in Nigeria. It identifies such benefits as providing avenues for immediate feedback, more diverse public input leading to more comprehensive stories and serving as a platform for social activism. However, it notes the prevalence of ethical infractions like misinformation, sensationalism, plagiarism/copyright infringement, very little consideration of public good and indecency. It recommends the establishment of associations of online reporters according to their genres and an overarching body to fashion out ethical guidelines and ratify them for their work in order to forestall severe censorship and legal regulation by government.

**Keywords:** Online Reporting, Ethics, Benefits, Ethical Violations, Ethical Guidance

## 1. Introduction

Many Nigerians, both the highly educated and the semi-literate, are attached to their cell phones, other mobile technologies and classes of computers largely because they are Internet-enabled. So they go online for news, entertainment, academic material and to connect with friends, business associates and kin.

Sometimes, they take what they come across on their social media news feed. At other times, they visit blogs and online news sites for more of what they seek and they follow some links provided in all the afore-mentioned platforms for the same reason.

Conversely, many people across the globe, including Nigerians, no longer read hard copy media. This has resulted in dwindling revenues for many media leading to the launching of online versions along with their print versions or setting up of exclusively online reporting ventures like Nigeria's *TheCable* newspaper (Arogundade, 2014) and many others hoping to cash in on the lucrative business potentials therein. *Newsweek* magazine's hiatus from publishing print editions between December 2012 and March 2014 (only three print editions were produced during the interval) was principally a cost-saving measure. According to a British Broadcasting Service (BBC) news report, the current affairs magazine "discontinued its print edition ... after 80 years, amid falling advertising revenues as readers moved towards online publications" (Singh, 2015).

According to the National Communications Commission (NCC), as at Feb. 2014, 57.8 million telecommunications subscribers used Internet data in Nigeria (News Agency of Nigeria). That is up from 34.5 million, the figure given by the NCC in June 2013: a growth of over 23 million users in just eight months. More recent data from the NCC show that the figure had jumped to 65 million average monthly Internet data subscribers by June 2014. If that rate of growth continues, Nigeria will have maximum Internet reach in less than a decade, after accounting for population growth.

While we celebrate the improved Internet access with all the benefits accruing therefrom to users and various sectors of society, we need to pause and examine the quality of content users are exposed to online and see in what ways it is contributing to building or marring the nation and the citizens.

Many scholars and commentators have lamented the recklessness of online media operators in Nigeria. For instance, Olalekan (2014, p. 427) observes that,

Currently, Nigeria is rife with so many bloggers and ... internet aficionados that try to promote their ideologies and opinions through this medium. However, in a bid to get the most viewership/readership visits, a lot of them throw caution to the wind and opt for the sensational, obscene and generally objectionable, thinking they are simply expressing themselves.

Similarly, an online survey of citizen journalists, including bloggers, from nine African countries found that while some citizen journalists feel they should work within the same ethical boundaries as traditional journalists, others do not realise they have a responsibility to operate ethically (Mutsvairo, Columbus & Leijendekker, 2014). In other words, some of these online reporters, who many people are resorting to for facts and comments on virtually every issue, feel the Internet is free and they can post whatever they choose. Respondents to the survey

also believed that both trained and untrained journalists are guilty of ethical infractions on the Internet. The campaigns for the 2015 general elections in Nigeria showed the level to which acrimony, hate speech and destabilising information can be freely peddled on the Internet with potentially disastrous consequences. In the light of the foregoing, this study x-rays the unethical practices noticeable in online reporting in Nigeria with a view to buttressing the need for ethical guidance for it. The study is an analytical discourse enriched with examples derived from a qualitative reading of relevant online news reports and interactions with some online reporters in Nigeria's North Central, North West, South West and South South geo-political zones under the auspices of a National Orientation Agency (NOA) project aimed at creating awareness among them on the need for ethics and building their capacity on how to apply it in their work. The paper begins with definition of key concepts, followed by the benefits and ethical violations in online reporting in Nigeria. It highlights the need to address these violations internally forthwith and suggests steps that can be taken to do so. The last section is the Conclusion.

## 2. Definitions

### 2.1 Social Media

Digital and social marketing strategist, Doreen Moran, defines social media as “a collection of online media platforms and tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself, facilitating conversations and interactions online between groups of people”. The most common of these platforms in Nigeria are Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Blackberry Messenger Service. Some authorities like the British Institute of Business Ethics also classify blogs and webcasts as social media but for the purpose of this discourse, we shall look at blogs separately from the kinds of social media mentioned above. The social media are most people's introduction to online media through which they have access to the posts of others, including bloggers and various online news sites, following links occasionally to the Web sites of the individuals and organisations whose posts interest them.

### 2.2 Blog

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a blog as “a Web site on which someone writes about personal opinions, activities and experiences”. It gives a fuller definition as “a Web site that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer; also: the contents of such a site”.

This definition shows that a blog is not a strait-laced composition. It does not follow a rigid format. It affords the writer the opportunity to share thoughts, observations and experiences in a casual manner. The meaning of the word as rendered in the *Oxford English Dictionary* highlights this element of blogs. It states that a blog is a “regularly updated website or web page typically ... run by an individual or small group, that is written in an informal and conversational style”. It also shows that the posts on a blog do not have a permanent form. They may be modified or added to as the situation they deal with changes.

A broader definition of blog from the *Business Dictionary* draws attention to more of its elements. It explains that a blog is a

Website similar to an online journal that includes chronological entries made by individuals. The word blog was derived from the combination of the words web and log. Blogs typically focus on a subject (economy, entertainment news, etc.) and provide users with forums (or a comment area) to talk about each posting. Many people use blogs as they would a personal journal or diary.

This definition shows the attempt made in a blog to account for time. Journalists often give users of their blogs glimpses into what they do between filing reports with their organisations. Also, when covering exciting events like the Oscars and other award ceremonies, users with an insatiable appetite for behind-the-scenes action and tidbits can visit their blogs to get all that. Basically, the interesting material which would not be appropriate or could not be contained in their official reports can be found on their blogs.

The *Business Dictionary* definition also brings out the interactive nature of blogs. In fact, because of that feature, one blogger named Jeff Bullas contends that,

Just about everyone is a blogger these days whether they realise it or not. If you write something on Facebook and receive comments and feedback, then you are a blogger. Tweet a short sentence of 140 characters on Twitter and you are a micro blogger. Upload a video on YouTube where you can obtain subscribers and elicit comments, then you are a video blogger.

However, he admits that there is a world of difference between random posting on the social media and maintaining a blogging platform, especially a custom domain.

A blog gives greater room for self-expression than the social media and allows one to treat issues in greater depth (Patel, 2012). One is reminded of American entertainer, Nick Cannon's attempt to express his outrage over the media's handling of stories about his marital troubles with singer, Mariah Carey. It took him 19 tweets to get the matter off his chest!

Furthermore, a blog with a custom domain distinguishes the owner from the crowd on the social media. This is

where blogging moves from an occasional pastime to a profession or a means of livelihood. At this point, the blogger begins to carve a niche for himself or herself. The blogs of famous Nigerian bloggers are patronised by corporate advertisers and they get other streams of income, for instance, through speaking engagements.

The final feature of blogging as seen from the *Business Dictionary* definition concerns specialisation. Some blogs provide educational material, some offer socio-political commentary, others focus on music, ICTs and relationship counselling, among other areas. It takes a great deal of resourcefulness to offer the best in one's chosen area as Jide Ogunsanya is reputed to do on his educational tutorial site and Loy Okieze on his technology blog (Top 10 bloggers in Nigeria, 2014).

Some of these bloggers have hundreds of thousands, some millions of users. With such a huge following, discussions of responsibilities that should be met are bound to arise. And as stated earlier, many people who may not be professional bloggers contribute to blogging platforms and have accounts or pages on social media through which they share information and viewpoints on a variety of issues. Some of them have an impressive following and pull some measure of weight in public discourse. They too need to imbibe a sense of accountability.

### 2.3 Citizen Journalism

Citing Allan (2009, pp. 18 & 21), Mutsvairo et al. (2014, p. 6) describe citizen journalists as persons who run "amateur news publications" or "incidental journalists' who happen to witness and capture, then publicise events". Citizen journalism is at work when "people without professional journalism training ... use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment, or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others" (Glaser, 2010, p. 578). This may have been how the practice began, but some citizen journalism sites now seem to be in competition with the traditional media. However, they offer a valuable service, such as reporting events that would have been suppressed by traditional media (e.g. "embarrassing or illegal behaviour" of very important persons recorded by passersby – Paxson, 2010, p. 185).

### 2.4 Online Reporting

This is an umbrella term for various types of news dissemination via the Internet. It includes the news-related activities of traditional journalism's online sites, social media, blogging platforms and citizen journalism Web sites.

In sum, online reporting sites generally jostle for public attention, attempting to get as many clicks as possible, not just to encourage greater traffic of ordinary users but to catch advertisers. This applies whether they are on social media, blogs or their own Web sites. This has led to a tabloidisation of content across board, appealing to the lowest common denominator of public taste. This and many other problems they create make this consideration of ethics for their operations imperative.

### 2.5 Ethics

The word 'ethics' refers to "the principles of right and wrong that are accepted by an individual or a group" (*Word Web English Dictionary and Thesaurus*). These principles are predetermined to save those who have accepted them from the trouble of wondering what to do when confronted with choices on how to act. They show them the desirable choices to make, the choices that promote good to self and others.

Furthermore, these principles are not externally imposed but adopted by the individual within himself or by the group in question, may be of people in a particular line of work. The principles, often expressed in a code of conduct, spell out the best way to carry out their duties in a professional and responsible manner.

## 3. Benefits of Online Reporting

Online reporting provides both personal benefits to the practitioners and general benefits to society. Some of these benefits, which may also be a source of the problems they create, are as follows:

- It provides a quick and efficient way of delivering news to the public. For example, people get notifications of breaking news on their mobile devices at little cost and online news media are saved the expense of establishing and maintaining presses and physically distributing their publications.
- It is a means of spurring creativity and improving one's communication skills as literary ability is sharpened with constant practice. The zeal to compose posts is boosted by the ease of publication and such accruable benefits as fame and commercial gain.
- It is a good source of research material. For instance, the difficulty in the past of getting hard copies of newspapers, magazines as well as broadcast news bulletins for study is eased by access to online reporting Web sites, especially those run by traditional media organisations.
- Trained journalists who do online reporting on their own, especially blogging, use it as a means of

unrestrained expression beyond what they can put in their reports and programmes for their organisations. It serves a similar purpose for others who disdain or are not aware of the strictures of traditional news reporting. For example, they do not report with detachment but feel free to air their opinions and speculations along with their accounts of what actually happened in their posts about events.

- It provides room for immediate feedback and helps to gauge public reaction to or perception of an issue because of the interactive element. Online reporters often ask their users how they feel about issues to spur this expression of viewpoints.
- It helps to get fuller, more comprehensive reports as users are encouraged to share text, graphics, audio and video files they have that pertain to particular posts. In a similar vein, it helps to get a more accurate picture of a situation, in updates of posts arising from verifications and corrections posted in comments.
- It helps traditional media businesses to meet the challenges and competition from untrained journalism ventures online.
- It helps businesses generally to maintain informal contact with their clients thus giving them a closer identification with their brands.
- It can serve as a platform for social activism. It can help to raise public consciousness on social, political, economic and educational issues and spur the online community and other members of the public to carry out advocacy interventions to pressure the authorities to act on them. This was done during the Arab Spring and the January 2012 protests against the increase in the prices of petroleum products in Nigeria (Nworgu, 2012). More recently, we have seen the attempt to push for the release of the abducted Chibok girls through the Twitter campaign, #BringBackOurGirls.
- As seen in the definition of citizen journalism, online reporting platforms run by untrained reporters are more irreverent in their approach to selecting and presenting news than traditional journalists. Their language is racier and sassier, their content more diverse and entertaining (seeing that rumour and gossip are not left out). They, therefore, provide alternatives for bored and disenchanted members of the public who sometimes feel the traditional media are part of the Establishment.
- Some resourceful online reporters serve as sources of ready news for others, including traditional media's online and offline journalists, because they are noted for publishing exclusives and authoritative stories. Linda Ikeji's blog, *Premium Times* and *TheCable* are some of those often referenced by others.
- When online reporters are fiercely independent, they can do much good through investigative journalism.

#### 4. Ethical Violations Associated with Online Reporting in Nigeria

As many as the benefits are, online reporting poses a lot of problems to society. Although these problems largely emanate from sites run by untrained journalists, even those operated by the traditional media seem to be falling short of standards in the general moral decline we witness in society today. Some of the commonest ethical infractions are:

##### 4.1 Incorrect use of language

Bad grammar, wrong spelling, poor word choice, insufficient and/or incorrect use of punctuation marks abound in online reporting. These problems lead to inaccuracy of facts and their interpretation. For example, some online news outlets like *Rhodies World*, *P.M. News Nigeria* and *NaijaOnPoint* have posted pictures of ladies each publication claimed was the Nollywood actress, Ini Edo's twin. There were no inverted commas around the word 'twin' to show that they were merely drawing attention to a look-alike. What was more baffling was why subsequently in the case of *Rhodies World*, the lady's picture would be used in place of Ini Edo's in stories concerning her.

Another example is a headline from the *Vanguard's* online edition of Dec. 13, 2013, which read, "Man electrocuted atop moving train". The story, however, showed that the man was hurt but did not die. In the words of Ohaja (2014, p. 35), "One wonders why a reputable newspaper like the *Vanguard* would claim a man was electrocuted while he was still alive".

Wrong word usage also leads to the presentation of tips, comments and speculations with the certitude that makes them seem like factual news, although this may be deliberate mischief-making at work. An example was the widely-reported conclusion of plans to replace the chairman of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Attahiru Jega, with Prof. Nazim Mimiko prior to the 2015 general elections.

Although it may appear that low literacy levels are to blame for these lapses, one often finds that incorrect language use is a deliberate ploy to capture readers' attention.

#### 4.2 Publishing fabrications and outright lies

A more insidious problem with online reporting is the peddling of blatant falsehood that may maliciously attack persons and groups, impugn reputations and generally mislead the populace. It appears that some online reporters just concoct what they feel will raise the most dust and attribute it to highly-placed individuals in a most believable manner. Or they fail to confirm the veracity of information before posting.

A notable and mortifying example happened in May 2015. It involved *TheCable*, a highly respected online news outlet founded in April 2014 by Simon Kolawole, a former editor of *THISDAY* newspaper. *TheCable* which is usually seen as credible and authoritative erroneously reported that Nigeria's Nobel laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka, had in a lecture at Harvard University, accused the Igbos of being "greedy" and voting to satisfy their "stomachs" in the 2015 general elections. The story poured further vituperations on the Igbos, all of which Soyinka disowned, describing the paper as "one of the Internet infestations" people have to deal with and as among the "cowards who cannot fight their own battles but must fasten their imbecilic pronouncements on others" (Adesanya, 2015). The management of the paper promptly tendered "an unreserved apology" admitting that "the story misrepresented the views expressed by Soyinka in the question and answer session after his lecture" (*TheCable* apologises to Soyinka, 2015).

It is sad that *TheCable* which prides itself on taking the journalistic high road should be embroiled in this type of embarrassment but there are numerous less scrupulous sites that habitually copy and post unverified matter from undeclared sources. And in order to sell the lies posted, pictures are lifted from wherever and presented as evidence.

#### 4.3 Sensationalism

In a bid to attract huge user traffic, online reporters often use unnecessary superlatives and many headlines have no bearings on the stories they accompany. After the primaries for the Delta State local government elections in August 2014, one online paper (*The Guardian* to be exact) wrote a headline claiming that, "Alleged imposition of candidates tear (sic) PDP apart" (Akinfenwa, 2014). That is a clear case of stretching the truth.

Another instance is a story written on the resumption of schools in Enugu State and published in *THISDAY'S* online paper on Sept. 22, 2014. The headline read, "Ebola: Apprehension as schools resume in Enugu". The headline was trying to create a panic that was not evident in the story (Isiguzo & Okechukwu, 2014).

Similarly, during the uproar caused during the 2015 electioneering campaigns by the Oba of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu's threat against the Igbos on the issue of who to vote for in the Lagos State governorship contest, an online news site, *Nigerian Bulletin*, posted a story entitled "Buhari and Jonathan react to Oba of Lagos". However, the story was not news but merely an expression of outrage by the site which ended with the following statement: "As at the time of this report, 24 hours after Oba Akiolu said the Igbos would meet their end at the Lagos Lagoon if they go against his candidate, there has been no statement from either General Muhammadu Buhari or President Jonathan". This kind of journalism is in itself an outrage. Yet, it is common online. Titillating headlines are written promising things that the accompanying stories fail to deliver, the primary objective being to obtain undeserved clicks.

Furthermore, in a bid to post scoops, conflicting updates are hurriedly released without verification leading to misinformation.

#### 4.4 Spreading media illiteracy

Media literacy is a concept that covers knowledge of such things as: the various media and their features, processes involved in packaging reports and programmes, roles of media personnel and the ability to interpret media messages/content. It is essential for members of the public to enable them benefit fully from the media but it is much more important for media personnel to enable them do their work properly.

Many online reporters are not media literate enough and this results in shoddy performance. Ability to navigate the Web efficiently and pick out information from trustworthy sites is important in online news gathering. One fallout of the lack of this ability is the constant provision of useless links. Some of them cannot smell a hoax and help pranksters to circulate their work on the Internet. Two examples come to mind. One is a story about two stone slabs purportedly found by the Mars Rover (the 10 commandments) that provide evidence that "God is real". The story originated from the *Daily Currant*, a foreign prankster site, which writes jokes that closely resemble news with fabricated quotes to create believability. It was posted and reposted by some of our online reporters.

Another is the reposting of a story about an annual raping festival in India as if it were authentic news. It was, however, just an expensive joke composed by someone who was nauseated by the repeated news of gang rapes in India.

By posting such links, online reporters end up misinforming and miseducating their readers. And they sometimes post the links deliberately to shock or scandalise their readers.



#### *4.5 Plagiarism and copyright infringement*

Reckless cheating appears to be the norm in online reporting in Nigeria. People copy and paste the posts of others and other intellectual works without acknowledgement of source. They take credit for work done by others. That is plagiarism.

Many online reporters rewrite and post stories originally published by others, thinking that rewriting frees them from the obligation of citing their source. Such reporters are still guilty of plagiarism because a source ought to be quoted directly with inverted commas when his/her words are used verbatim or indirectly when the words are paraphrased or summarised. The credit should always go to the source of the idea in the write-up.

They also fail to obtain permission before using other people's copyrighted works extensively or wholesale and make money from these works, thereby depriving the original creators of part of their legitimate profits. That is copyright infringement. (Making copies of the stolen work for sale is piracy). For example, some online reporting sites constantly repost reports from particular news organisations without any partnership agreement between them and those organisations or specific waivers of copyright restrictions obtained.

The line between ethics and law is very thin here because there is a law on copyright protection in various countries. The law cited by the Google Manager for Communications and Public Affairs, Anglo-phone West Africa, Taiwo Kolade-Ogunlade, while giving reasons for the shutdown of Linda Ikeji's blog between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of Oct., 2014, is an American copyright law that protects digital content (Filani, 2014; Famutimi 2014). Kolade-Ogunlade said the blog was shut down as a result of complaints made to Google that hosts the blog that she had committed some plagiarism and copyright infringement. The shutdown lasted about 24 hours.

#### *4.6 Lack of a sense of social responsibility*

Some online reporting sites seem to exist to stir needless controversies. Shortly after the abduction of the Chibok girls, some online media claimed that the then president, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, planned to go to Chibok without giving their source as authoritative official channels. They asked their users if they felt he had done well to plan such a trip.

Then when they heard that Jonathan was going to Paris for a meeting with regional heads of state and the French president on how to tackle the spreading Boko Haram insurgency, they began to ask their users if they felt the President was right to cancel his trip to Chibok to go to Paris. Surely, a meeting of the sort Jonathan attended in Paris was not scheduled the day he left and there had been no official confirmation he had been billed to go to Chibok. So with the posting of unsubstantiated tips on disputable matters like this, audience metrics works in favour of the sites but the long-term effects of such duplicity can be tragic if not checked.

The role of a news medium should include letting the citizens know the government's programmes and projects for their welfare and drawing attention to areas still requiring attention as well as suspected cases of misdeeds by government officials. Criticism should always be constructive. Proffering solutions and showing the way forward should be seen as an essential part of it. However, being in a perpetual fault-finding mode poisons the minds of citizens against the government and creates an unnecessary atmosphere of hopelessness.

Online reporting sites are also notorious for staging media circuses in which media trials are held and guilty verdicts returned. Thereafter, they relentlessly press for punitive measures to be taken against the concerned parties. This gives the impression of hatchet jobs being done on people as contrived by those with axes to grind with them. This was the impression one got in the case of Stella Oduah, the ex-minister of aviation. She was accused of improperly acquiring two bullet-proof vehicles for her office at the cost of N255million (\$1.6m). The media harped on the matter as if nothing else needed attention at the time. Snide remarks were constantly made about her and the public was invited to condemn her in comments with leading questions. They refused to let up until she was removed from office (Kilanko, 2013).

The media are right to draw attention to suspected wrongdoing but trial and sentencing is beyond their purview. People should be considered innocent until proven guilty by competent authorities and they should be permitted to have a fair trial.

#### *4.7 Very little consideration of public good*

According to Jacquette (2007, p. 19), "Journalists are morally committed to maximally relevant truth-telling in the public interest and for the public good". However, there is a propensity for dwelling on trivia in online reporting and engaging users in debates on it. The warning of Postman (1985) on this matter is that: "When a population is distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainment, when serious public conversation becomes baby talk ... a nation finds itself at risk" (Quoted in Udeze & Uzuegbunam, 2013, p. 77).

Beyond taking up time people could use in more worthwhile pursuits, online reporters, and even the traditional media (except perhaps the broadcast arm), hasten to publish stories without considering what dangers they may bring to the public. This aligns with the findings of Mutsvairo et al. (2014, p. 5) that citizen journalists tend to oppose self-censorship "even if it is in the name of national security". Nigeria, for instance, is battling an

insurgency and one of the weapons of terrorists is to create fear and panic. They seek media attention to publicise their threats and boast of their ‘accomplishments’. And here we have the media falling over themselves to give them the visibility they crave. While we do not support suppressing information that will help the public escape danger, while we also acknowledge that official military sources have not always been credible; we do not see how publicising terrorist propaganda, reporting classified security information that could jeopardise troop manoeuvres or blowing terrorist gains out of proportion can help the public.

Sometimes, we even find online reporters seeming to supply ideas to the terrorists. After the abduction of the Chibok girls in April 2014, the terrorists did not immediately take responsibility for it and when the leader spoke in a video clip, he said they would sell the girls off for a paltry sum. Then people who pretended to be in the minds of the terrorists started saying online that they would use the girls as bargaining chips to secure the release of their confederates in government custody while some said they would ask for ransom. And to make matters worse, one reads a headline that says, “Boko Haram: The exploits of a vicious terror group” on no less than [thisdaylive.com](http://thisdaylive.com) (the online platform on *THISDAY* newspapers) and the inevitable reposting by many other news sites follows, giving the impression that the media are celebrating the group’s notoriety for bloodletting and secessionist claims.

Also, due to few or absent moderators, getting on a discussion thread on many online reporting sites is like running the gauntlet. People attack you personally, even checking your profile for ammunition. You will be threatened; accused of false motives, religious and ethnic bias (Abdulazeez, 2014). This hurling of hate messages recently reached a crescendo during politicking for the 2015 elections. It appears that online reporters need reminding that these boisterous conversations do nothing to reinforce the values of respect, courtesy and kindness to one another, not to speak of what they do to heighten divisions among the citizenry.

#### 4.8 Indecency

Some online reporting sites find nothing wrong in debasing public taste. They habitually post indecent jokes, nude images and gory sights. For example, when Kim Kardashian’s full nude pictures were published by *Paper* magazine, news sites that care about ethics covered or blurred her privates before reposting them but many local online reporters published the pictures uncensored (Kim Kardashian breaks the internet in newly-released naked photos, 2014).

In the same vein, prophesying on users, giving them false hope that if they click “like” or type “amen”, they would receive some kind of windfall is in bad taste. The irony here is that the administrator of a Web site just posts a sexually explicit story and in the next moment, he or she is calling down Holy Ghost fire to consume all the reader’s enemies and ‘releasing’ millions into his/her account. To be fair to online reporters, they are not the only ones using this gimmick.

### 5. Strategies for providing ethical guidance for online reporting in Nigeria

The problems of online reporting discussed so far should suffice to help us realise that some form of standardisation is required. Some persons have started calling for regulatory measures to be applied. For example, Omeri (2015, p. 2) cites a Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) report of March 2, 2015 in which a call was made for the relevant “authorities to put in place measures that will check the excesses of those that abuse the use of social media and other online platforms.” Omeri, however, advises online journalists to preempt such an eventuality by sanitising their business themselves.

In a similar vein, the Group Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, United Bank for Africa (Plc), Phillips Oduoza, warns that, “It is critical that online pirates” who operate solely to blackmail and spread falsehood about legitimate businesses be checked “through self-regulation so that the government is not forced to introduce statutory regulations” that may hamper press freedom (UBA GMB/CEO tasks journalists to strengthen self-regulation of online media, 2014).

It is also the position of this paper that a timely move towards self-regulation through a large-scale subscription to ethical guidelines is the proper way forward for online reporting in Nigeria. The time is ripe for online reporters to come together to discuss the moral imperatives they should pursue.

To achieve this, they can form bodies of say, bloggers, citizen journalists and social media enthusiasts who are seriously involved in news dissemination. Nigeria is a big country, so although such groups exist, they are limited in scope and membership. Sometimes, the groups are practically stillborn because of lack of interest or support from those they are meant for and lack of funds to prosecute their mission with. Examples include the Citizen Journalists Association of Nigeria (CJAN) and the Nigeria Bloggers and Online Writers’ Forum which Yinka Olaito, the Content Director of Africa Development Talk (an online discussion platform) initiated in early June 2015. There must, therefore, be an overarching body of online reporters with substantial membership and a national spread for its impact to be felt. This larger body should harmonise, regulate and co-ordinate the activities of online reporters in Nigeria.

Directories of members of such bodies containing basic information that many responsible online reporters

already have on their platforms like names, aliases, organisational affiliation/workplace, email address and phone numbers (optional), but no physical addresses should be compiled.

The benefits of such directories include ease of access to online reporters by members of the public who wish to offer tips, corrections and sundry material that can enrich their content. It is also helpful for those who wish to complain about certain content or issues to be able to do so through other channels, not just the comment area following posts on the concerned online reporter's platform. Besides, when people know that their work can be traced back to them, it could make them to compose their posts with greater care and thoroughness, at least, to escape the public opprobrium they would attract if they post irresponsibly (Ogunlesi, 2015).

Some might fear that such directories may make it easy for government to hunt down or censor those it feels oppose it. For example, a blogger, Sola Fagorusi of One Life Initiative, feels this might reveal the identities of whistle blowers and open them up to victimisation. However, Nigeria is a democracy with the Freedom of Information Act, 2011 and relevant constitutional provisions in place, namely, Section 22 that charges the press to uphold the accountability of the government to the people and Section 39 that guarantees freedom of expression and of the press. The government is more likely under the circumstance to encourage, rather than stifle free flow of information. But in the event that there is a nominally democratic government that is inclined to repress personal freedoms, the lack of such a directory may not prevent it from tracking down its perceived enemies. Threat of criminal victimisation by other aggrieved persons should be promptly reported to the law enforcement agencies.

The larger online reporters' body should arrive at minimum ethical standards that should guide its members in their work. Its sub-bodies could also come up with such guides as specific to their genres of reporting, say, video blogging. These guides should borrow from foreign equivalents since Nigeria is part of the global village and should be codified and ratified by members. Relevant ideas should also be adopted from codes of ethics for traditional journalists both locally and internationally.

Some of these useful ideas plus the challenges and prospects of drawing up a code of ethics for online reporters in Nigeria are presented in Ohaja (forthcoming). That paper also provides information about an initiative sponsored by Nigeria's NOA in conjunction with development partners to enable the country's online reporters work out a self-regulatory mechanism.

Media organisations, government agencies, private sector corporations and development partners can help to fund the gatherings that culminate in the formation of formal bodies for online reporting. They should also assist in bankrolling enlightenment campaigns and capacity building workshops to teach online reporters the necessity for ethics and to familiarise them periodically with the contents of any code or codes that are arrived at through mutual agreement between a broad spectrum of online reporters.

This is a compelling task that would minimise the time and resources information, public relations and corporate affairs departments spend monitoring posts on online reporting sites and countering the misinformation and malicious accusations they spew out against the government, companies and agencies.

The orientation is essential because some believe the use of the Internet comes with no restriction whatsoever. In the words of Radcliffe (2014), "It is tempting ... to think that the Internet is a global jungle, where ... 'predatory' behavior is beyond the reach of law and morality" but that is not the case. In some countries that are seen as highly democratic, like South Korea, there are laws regulating online conduct. One such law forbids something some would consider a minor issue: the posting of anonymous comments online. Violating this law on a blog with more than 100,000 readers could land a person in jail for five years (Bracetti & Scott, 2012).

And in less open countries, the penalties can be more brutal. For example, on Jan. 9, 2015, Saudi Arabia began to administer in a session of public flogging the 1,000-lash sentence passed on a jailed blogger, Raif Badawi, "for running a liberal website devoted to freedom of speech in the conservative kingdom" (Black, 2015). Badawi has been in detention since mid-2012 but the sentence passed on him in May 2014 went beyond receiving 50 lashes every week for 20 weeks. His website was shut down; he was fined the equivalent of 175,000 pounds sterling and is to spend 10 years in jail. Acting now will save Nigeria's online reporters from attracting such government intervention in the form of severe censorship and laws that may erode the vibrancy of news dissemination in cyberspace.

Means of sanctioning erring online reporters should also be specified by their respective arms and the overall body. A blogger, Tolu Ogunlesi, suggests two commendable strategies in this regard. The first is naming and shaming by the offender's colleagues and the second is pressuring advertisers to withdraw their patronage from the platforms of those who persist in unethical conduct. Discussions among online reporters would ratify these measures and any others they wish to add, such as delisting of erring members from their directories after repeated warnings.

Positive sanctions such as awards and prizes for online reporting platforms that consistently exhibit high ethical standards could also be adopted by the online reporters themselves and other sectors of society that seek to boost and reinforce such excellent performance.



## 6. Conclusion

It is obvious that online reporting has assumed tremendous significance in Nigeria. A substantial part of the battle for votes in the last general elections was fought online. Only about 29million Nigerians exercised their franchise in the March 28, 2015 presidential election but the data cited earlier from the NCC shows that as at June 2014, Nigeria had a monthly average of 65 million active Internet data subscribers. Although the figure for March 2015 when that election was held would be much higher going by the previous record of growth cited earlier, we see that the number of persons whose votes decided the nation's fate about who occupies the No. 1 political seat was less than half the average monthly number of Internet data subscribers.

While we have no way of knowing how many of these voters are among the Internet data users, we can assume that a fair share are when we consider the transparency citizens' reports from across the nation gave the elections from the accreditation of voters to the actual voting and counting. Results were also uploaded by many individuals once they were signed by electoral officials at their wards such that even before the official announcements, those who were following the process online had clues as to who was winning and who was losing where.

In the light of the foregoing, Nigeria has gone far beyond the point where it can afford to ignore what goes on online. The popular notion that the digital divide is keeping most Nigerians out of cyberspace is fast becoming a fallacy. Currently, it is erroneous to assume that what goes on online here is the bandying about of ideas between an insignificant number of intellectuals and tertiary-educated persons disconnected from the larger segment of society. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) made that mistake in the last general elections thinking that the opposition party, the All Progressives' Congress (APC), with its Internet warriors could not dent its hold on the grassroots and paid dearly for it ultimately losing its position as the ruling party.

Nations can be built or destroyed online, businesses can be made to thrive or crumble and images (personal or corporate) can be garnished or tarnished with far-reaching consequences. Most of these hinge on the content available, primarily through online reporting sites. If online reporters are not engaged to act responsibly, if they continue the current reckless pursuit of profit and parochial agendas, Nigerians will continue to suffer the deleterious consequences as they contribute to increasing sectionalism, ethnocentrism, religious bigotry, immorality and the like. The government may then step in with strict censorship and laws that restrain the practice.

But if online reporters subscribe and adhere to ethical standards, they could set the agenda for inclusiveness in national life and introduce fruitful narratives into public discourse. They could help build a sense of nationhood in Nigerians and arm them with salient facts and views with which to make informed judgments. They would also contribute to a more positive perception of the country locally and internationally.

## References

- Abdulazeez, A. (2014, Mar. 12). A season of hate messages across the country. Retrieved from [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=650209891707531&id=378378918890631&refid=28&ft\\_t\\_eqid.5990275384530077474%3Amf\\_story\\_key.6854731797054900490&tn\\_=%2As](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=650209891707531&id=378378918890631&refid=28&ft_t_eqid.5990275384530077474%3Amf_story_key.6854731797054900490&tn_=%2As) on Jan. 20, 2015.
- Adesanya, A. (2015, May 7). I never berated Igbo over voting pattern –Soyinka. Retrieved from <http://nationalmirroronline.net/new/i-never-berated-igbo-over-voting-pattern-soyinka/> on May, 24, 2015.
- Adetayo, O. (2014, May 16). Jonathan never scheduled visit to Chibok – Presidency. Retrieved from <http://punchng.com/news/jonathan-never-scheduled-visit-to-chibok-presidency/> on June 16, 2015.
- Akinfenwa, G. (2014, Aug. 10). Delta council poll: Alleged imposition of candidates tear PDP apart. Retrieved from [www.nguardiannews.com/features/policy-a-politics/174397-delta-council-poll-alleged-imposition-of-candidates-tear-pdp-apart-on-Sept.-26](http://www.nguardiannews.com/features/policy-a-politics/174397-delta-council-poll-alleged-imposition-of-candidates-tear-pdp-apart-on-Sept.-26), 2014.
- Allan, S. (2009). Histories of citizen journalism. In S. Allan & E. Thorsen (Ed.). *Citizen journalism: Global perspectives*, pp. 17-32. New York: Peter Lang.
- Arogundade, F. (2014, May 11). Why I set up TheCable Online newspaper – Kolawole. Retrieved from <http://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2014/05/11/set-the-cable-online-newspaper-kolawole/> on May, 26, 2015.
- Black, I. (2015, Jan. 11). Global outrage at Saudi Arabia as jailed blogger receives public flogging. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/11/flogging-global-outrage-saudi-arabia-silent> on June 15, 2015.
- Blog – Definition and more. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved from [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/) on Oct. 8, 2014.
- Boko Haram: The exploits of a vicious terrorist group. Retrieved from [www.thisdaylive.com/articles/boko-haram-the-exploits-of-a-vicious-terrorist-group/191584/](http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/boko-haram-the-exploits-of-a-vicious-terrorist-group/191584/) on Jan. 20, 2015.
- Bracetti, A. & Scott, D. (2012, Aug. 3). 10 countries with ridiculous Internet laws. Retrieved

- from <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/08/10-countries-with-ridiculous-internet-laws/> on June 14, 2015.
- Buhari and Jonathan react to Oba of Lagos. (2015, Apr. 7). Retrieved from <http://www.nigerianbulletin.com/threads/buhari-and-jonathan-react-to-oba-of-lagos.109901/> on May 24, 2015.
- Bullas, J. (2012, July 6). What are the 10 secret benefits of blogging. Retrieved from [www.jeffbullas.com/2012/07/06/what-are-the-10-secret-benefits-of-blogging/](http://www.jeffbullas.com/2012/07/06/what-are-the-10-secret-benefits-of-blogging/) on Oct. 9, 2014.
- Citizen Journalists Association of Nigeria (CJAN). Retrieved from <http://citizenjournalistsassociationofng.blogspot.com/?m=1> on June 14, 2015.
- Definition of blog. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved from [www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/blog](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/blog) on Oct. 8, 2014.
- Fagorusi, S. (2015, May 14). Contribution made during interactive session at the Rivers edition of the Nigerian Bloggers' and Social Media Workshop organised by the National Orientation Agency and held at the Juanita Hotels, Port Harcourt on May 13 &14, 2015.
- Famutimi, T. (2014, Oct. 9). Google shuts down Linda Ikeji's blog. Retrieved from [www.punchng.com/i-punch/google-shuts-down-linda-ikejis-blog/](http://www.punchng.com/i-punch/google-shuts-down-linda-ikejis-blog/) on Oct. 9, 2014.
- Filani, O. (2014, Oct. 9). Google explains why it shut down Linda Ikeji's blog. Retrieved from <http://dailypost.org.ng/2014/10/09/respecter-persons-comes-copyright-google-explains-linda-ikejis-blog-2/> on Oct. 9, 2014.
- Glaser, M. (2010). Citizen journalism: Widening world views, extending democracy. In S. Allan (Ed.). *The Routledge companion to news and journalism*, pp. 578 – 590. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Isiguzo, C. & Okechukwu, L. (2014, Sept. 22). Ebola: Apprehension as schools resume in Enugu. Retrieved from [www.thisdaylive.com/articles/ebola-apprehension-as-schools-resume-in-enugu/189654/](http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/ebola-apprehension-as-schools-resume-in-enugu/189654/) on Oct. 10, 2014.
- Jacquette, D. J. (2007). *Journalistic ethics: Moral responsibility in the media*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice-Hall.
- Jonathan cancels Chibok visit for Paris security summit, Nigerians disappointed. (2014, May 16). Retrieved from <http://naijagists.com/jonathan-cancels-chibok-trip-for-paris-security-summit-nigerians-disappointed/> on June 16, 2015.
- Kilanko, M. (2013, Oct. 21). Jonathan finally agrees to sack Stella Oduah and recover the N255m. Retrieved from <http://www.osundefender.org/?p=128010> on June 16, 2015.
- Kim Kardashian breaks the internet in newly released naked photos. (2014). Retrieved from <http://thenet.ng/2014/11/kim-kardashian-breaks-the-internet-in-newly-released-naked-photos/> on Jan. 20, 2015.
- Meet actress Ini Edo's twin sister. (2014, Nov. 13). Retrieved from <http://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2014/11/13/meet-actress-ini-edos-twin-sister/> on June 16, 2015.
- Meet Ini Edo's identical twin sister we never knew ... (2015, Jan. 31). Retrieved from <https://m.facebook.com/NaijaPointers/posts/569844686490136> on June 16, 2015.
- Mobile Internet data subscribers in Nigeria reaches 65 million monthly. (2014, Sept. 18). Retrieved from <http://techloy.com/2014/09/18/mobile-internet-data-subscribers-in-nigeria-reaches-65-million-monthly> on May 14, 2015.
- Moran, D. in H. Cohen. (2011, May 9). Social media definitions. Retrieved from <http://heidicohen.com/social-media-definition/> on Oct. 9, 2014.
- Mutsvairo, B., Columbus, S., & Leijendekker, I. (2014). Reconnoitering the role of (citizen) journalism ethics in the emerging networked public sphere. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 35(3), 4-22.
- Nazim Mimiko nominated to replace Jega from March 1, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.nairaland.com/2139428/nazim-mimiko-nominated-replace-jega> on May 24, 2015.
- NCC says 34.5m subscribers in Nigeria use data on Internet. (2013, June 18). Retrieved from [www.vanguardngr.com/2013/06/](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/06/) on Oct. 9, 2014.
- News Agency of Nigeria. (2014, Feb. 14). 57.8 telecoms subscribers use internet data, says NCC. Retrieved from [punchng.com/news](http://punchng.com/news) on Oct. 9, 2014.
- Nworgu, K. O. *Mass media writing styles*. Owerri, Nigeria: Ultimate Books.
- Ogunlesi, T. (2015, May 14). Contributions made during interactive session at the Rivers edition of the Nigerian Bloggers' and Social Media Workshop organised by the National Orientation Agency and held at the Juanita Hotels, Port Harcourt on May 13 &14, 2015.
- Olalekan, A. A. (2014). Digital news media, ethics and freedom of expression – A Nigerian perspective. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. 5(7), 426-434.
- Olaito, Y. (2015, June 8). Nigeria bloggers and online writers' forum: Free membership opens. Retrieved from <http://yinkaolaito.com/2015/06/nigeria-bloggers-and-online-writers-forum-free-membership->

- [opens/](#) on June 14, 2015.
- Omeri, M. (2015, May 13). Welcome address at the Rivers edition of the Nigeria Bloggers and Social Media Workshop held at the Juanita Hotels, Port Harcourt on May 13 & 14, 2015.
- Ohaja, E. U. (2014). Ethical considerations for journalists in the coverage of national conferences. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*. 6(2), 129-141.
- Patel, N. (2012, Jan. 25). 7 reasons why blogging is still important in 2012. Retrieved from [www.searchenginejournal.com/7-reasons-why-blogging-is-still-important-in-2012/39225/](http://www.searchenginejournal.com/7-reasons-why-blogging-is-still-important-in-2012/39225/) on Oct. 8, 2014.
- Paxson, P. (2010). *Mass communications and media studies. An introduction*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. London, England: Methuen.
- Prof Nazim Mimiko nominated to replace INEC Chairman, Attahiru Jega on March 1, 2015. (2015, Feb. 11). Retrieved from <http://www.flatimes.com/2015/02/prof-nazim-mimiko-nominated-replace-inec-chairman-attahiru-jega-march-1-2015.html?m=1> on May 24, 2015.
- Radcliffe, D. (2014, Nov. 9). The Internet: Power without responsibility? Retrieved from <http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/5784540> on June 14, 2015.
- Singh, P. P. (2014, Mar 7). Newsweek magazine relaunches print edition. Retrieved from [www.bbc.com/news/business-26460261](http://www.bbc.com/news/business-26460261) on May 26, 2015.
- TheCable apologises to Soyinka over 'Igbo' story. (2015, May 6). Retrieved from <http://www.thecable.ng/thecable-apologises-soyinka-igbo-story> on May 21, 2015.
- The Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998: US Copyright Office Summary. (Dec. 1998). Retrieved from [www.copyright.gov/1513726639/dmca.pdf](http://www.copyright.gov/1513726639/dmca.pdf) on Oct. 9, 2014.
- The ethical challenges of social media. (Dec. 2011). *Business ethics briefing*. Issue 22. Institute of Business Ethics. Retrieved from [www.ibe.org.uk/7394819/ibe\\_briefing\\_22\\_the\\_ethical\\_challenges\\_of\\_social\\_media.pdf](http://www.ibe.org.uk/7394819/ibe_briefing_22_the_ethical_challenges_of_social_media.pdf) on Oct. 9, 2014.
- Top 10 bloggers in Nigeria. (2014, Jan. 9). RanksNG. Retrieved from [www.ranksng.com/top-10-bloggers-in-nigeria/](http://www.ranksng.com/top-10-bloggers-in-nigeria/) on Oct. 8, 2014.
- UBA GMD/CEO tasks journalists to strengthen self-regulation of online media. (2014, June 30). Retrieved from <https://www.ubagroup.com/mc/newsandevents/newstopic?id=20140630090337yvn2vpx6tt> on May 24, 2015.
- Udeze, S. E. & Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2013). Sensationalism in the print media: The right to sell or the right to tell? *Journal of Communication and Media Research*. 5(1), 69 – 78.
- Wakili, I. (2014, May 16). Jonathan cancels trip to Chibok. Retrieved from <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/daily/index.php/top-stories/24299-jonathan-cancels-trip-to-chibok> on June 16, 2015.
- What is blog? Definition and meaning. *Business Dictionary*. Retrieved from [www.businessdictionary.com/definition/blog.html](http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/blog.html) on Oct. 8, 2014.
- Word Web English Dictionary and Thesaurus* (App).