

# Unethical Practices in the Mass Media: A Study of some Selected Media Houses in Kano Metropolis, Nigeria

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## Abstract

The study examines the “unethical Practices in the Media: studies of some selected media in Kano metropolis. Four media houses in the Kano metropolis were purposively selected. These include Kano Radio, Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Kano, Freedom Radio, and the Daily Trust. Considering the critical, but vital roles of the media in nation building in any democratic setting, this study is situated within the Social Responsibility Theory and Kant’s Duty Law Theory. The researcher adopts a qualitative method in carrying out this research. It can be deduced from the findings that respondents strongly disagree that journalists are well paid in Nigeria, only a few respondents react otherwise. Therefore, we can conclude that it is conspicuous Nigerian journalists’ are not well remunerated. And this can be said to pose a constraint to the efficiency and effectiveness in their operations Findings also revealed that some of the journalists in Kano State practice unethically, while only few respondents are of a different opinion. This presupposes that some journalists in Kano State are involved in this practice. This means that their activities are devoid of objectivity, and has caused the masses to have little or no confidence in their activities. In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are important: Remuneration for journalists is not commensurate with the hazards of the profession. The poor remuneration is not only responsible for the brown envelope syndrome, but also hinders the press from performing up to expectation. The employers of journalists should therefore ensure that remuneration for journalists is commensurate with the work they do. Owners of media organizations should allow journalists to perform their duties according to the ethics of the profession. Government should increase the salary of journalists and be compensated after years of service.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Mass media, Kano

## 1. Introduction

Every society, perhaps from the beginning of human existence, once people began to live as members of a group or society, the issue of proper and acceptable conduct often arose. The fundamental importance of this is to keep human groups alive and harmonious. Mike (2001) refers to the fundamental importance of morality in keeping human groups alive and harmonious. According to him, “*Because of the great emphasis on one’s relationship with other people, both living and the dead, moral ethics has been evolved in order to keep society alive but also in harmony.*” The formulation of the topic of this project, “Unethical Practice in the Nigeria Media: A Reflection of the Larger Society”, is borne out of my observation of media performances in the recent time. The media occupies a strategic and sensitive position in the society, and as the custodian of information, they influence the course of events and shape what choices that citizens make through the dissemination of information, which they have access to. Although ethics have a very long history, as it is as old as mankind, yet journalistic ethics is a relatively modern philosophy. The earliest signs of ethics in Mass Communication appeared at the turn of the twentieth century as a reaction against the excesses of the extreme freedom of liberation theory of the press (Sambo, 2005). Unfortunately, with the checking of the excesses of the media, objectivity became the only casual in the media contents. People in different parts of the world are becoming increasingly vocal in their condemnation of the transgressions of the press as an institution, which is becoming more and more powerful with the increasing sophistication of new information technology. Similarly, pressures from media owners, advertisers, socio-cultural groups and the influence of the political class amount to the unethical practices in Nigerian journalism. These unethical practices manifest in under-reporting, selective reporting, distortion of facts, sensationalism and the blackout of some social groups or people that reflect the society in which Nigerian journalism operates.

I discovered after considerable research, however, that unethical practice in the Nigeria media does not exist in isolation, but as part of the overall ethical issues and problems in our society. Some have argued that the spate of unethical practices of the media is not unconnected with the general state of the country, which is said to be “crawling with all manners of ethical maladies and unethical behavior”, as well as a culture that does not value integrity, honesty and hard work (Okoye, 2007).

Mass Communication is a social process and the mass media works in conjunction with the social institutions that make up the social system. Thus, it will be meaningless to discuss an institution such as the media as though it operates in isolation unconcerned with other social processes. This is what gave birth to the research topic “Unethical Practice in the Nigerian Media: A Reflection of the Larger Society”.

## 2. Objective of the Study

Corruption in the Nigerian media is not something one can accomplish overnight because it has seemingly become part of the "Code of Conduct" of journalists in the media. It is a practice that has become rampant. However, if these problems are not nipped in the bud, it will have a debilitating impact on the future of journalism in Nigeria. Therefore, we have decided to research deeper into what have been responsible for corrupt practices in the media and proffer some solutions towards bringing the practice to the barest minimum. A handful of factors have been responsible for the unethical practices in the media, which are discussed for proper assessment and amendment.

It has been noted that journalists in Kano today have become an endangered species because of lack of job security. Very few newspapers and broadcast media are able to pay attractive salaries regularly, and very few are able to provide the necessary infrastructures for the sustenance of their business. Yet, we wake up every day to see newspapers being launched without necessary consideration for the interest of the society. To this end, the findings of this research aim at serving as a platform of correction so that professional journalists will not be forced to surrender the hard earned press freedom. This is because this diminishes their status as journalists and, more importantly, obstructs the free flow of information, which is so essential to the maintenance of democratic freedom.

## 3. Scope of the Study

This research is limited to only four media houses in Kano metropolis. They are Radio Kano, Nigerian Television Authority, Freedom Radio and The Daily Trust Newspaper.

## 4. Significance of the Study

The findings of this research are aimed at uncovering the perturbing issues that have served as a clog in the wheel of progress of the media in their bid to carry out duties responsibly and efficiently. It is also to entreat the Government, the private sector and the masses to palliate the conditions in which journalists have been subdued, so as to get the best out of them. A major significance of this research is to draw the attention of practicing journalists, curb reporters and journalists in themaking that the profession is not as romantic and just mere writing and reporting of news as they might have anticipated. But that it rather demands a total sense of commitment, responsibility, honesty, firmness and determination. It is also significant in that it will put flesh on the bones of academic theories, as the findings of the research will assist the future researchers.

## 5. Literature Review

The media is a fundamental part of contemporary life and has become the dominant social institution in the society. The role of the media encompasses almost everything about human life. Because of the increasingly important roles the media play in modern societies, and the fact that the media is a very powerful tool, the abuse of which can spell doom for societies, there is the need for effective mechanisms to ensure its continuous conformity to acceptable ethical standards. The media is viewed as a distinctive such information does not violate the security of the state, and provides better understanding for the public. The power of the government at times goes contrary to the definition of free press because it misuses the secrecy power given to it.

### 5.1 Journalism Ethics

Ethics has a very long history; journalistic ethics is a relatively modern philosophy. The earliest sign of ethics in mass communication appeared at the turn of the twentieth century as a reaction against the excesses of the extreme freedom of the Libertarian Theory of the press (Okoye, 2007). The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines "ethics" as "a system of moral principles or rules of behavior". Media ethics can therefore be defined as the rules of conduct guiding journalists and news organizations so as to make the work conscientiously without spoiling the image of their profession and of the media.

Appropriately therefore, the book, *Fundamentals of Newspaper Journalism*, quoted previously, states that "a profession without a code of ethics will lack mechanism for self-regulation and self-preservation". In other words, the main aim of media ethics is to protect the integrity of the media. For this reason, the above named book refers to media ethics as a *watchdog for the press*". As such, media ethics seeks to prevent journalists from engaging in unprofessional and unethical behavior. Such unethical conduct includes deliberate falsehood and the invasion of other peoples' privacy. Also called the "Free Press Theory" (Sambo, 2005), the Libertarian Theory in its most basic form advocates that the press should be completely free to publish what it likes. The abuse of this had given rise to negative journalistic practices as mentioned above, characterized by irresponsibility, sensationalism and character assassination.

By the twentieth century, the press had suffered all these abuses and the time was ripe for the emergence of a theory of a free but responsible press. Thus came into existence the "Social Responsibility Theory" of the press, characterized by the rise of professional journalistic associations with "Code of Ethics"

designed to encourage responsible behavior by the members. This is the situation that Gwandu (2010) refers to when he says “*journalistic ethics emerged as a response to the crises of confidence in journalism*”.

Given the gross abuse of the unlimited freedom enjoyed by the press under the Libertarian Theory, the Social Responsibility Theory stresses the need to reconcile the freedom of the press with responsibility to the society. (M Bayo (2006), in upholding this view, says:

Freedom and responsibility should not be viewed in isolation as two separate concepts. They are two sides of one coin. A free press, which is not responsible, abuses its freedom. A press, which is not free, is denied the opportunity to be responsible and to be accountable to its readers and audience.

Media ethics are a highly sensitive issue. It is a central issue in this discussion and will be given its due prominence in a later section of the project.

## 6. The unethical Practices in the Mass Media

A journalist practice simply means he or she does not practice either according to the media ethics, press laws or NBC codes. However, unethical practices in journalism do not exist in isolation, but as part of the overall ethical issues and societal problems in the world. Mass Communication is a social process and the mass media works in conjunction with other social institutions that make up the social system. Thus, it will be meaningless discussing an institution such as Mass Communication as though it operates in isolation unconnected to other social processes.

Every society has its moral problems, and a journalist is a member of the society. The type of society which the person comes from or in which he operates determines the individual's behavior. The Nigerian society, for instance, is filled with all sorts of ethical and social maladies that have defied all cures over the years. Most of these problems are in one way or another related to the all-encompassing problem of materialism. What journalists write inevitably touches other people's lives, and that information can ruin lives just as it can mend them. Consequently, no other profession is neither obsessed with ethics nor so roundly condemned for its transgressions (Kant, 1959). People in different parts of the world are becoming increasingly vocal in their condemnation of the transgressions of the press, which, as an institution, is becoming more and more powerful with the increasing sophistication of new information technologies.

Despite the introduction of a code of ethics for Nigerian journalists and the setting up of the Nigerian Press Council, however, there are other ethical issues which are part of the overall problem in the society. These include:

1. Sycophancy
2. Character Assassination
3. Pressure
4. Afghanistanism
5. Bribery
6. Moonlighting
7. Sensationalism
8. Self-censorship
9. Deception
10. Freebies and Junket journalism
11. Brown envelopes
12. Faking stories
13. Hacking etc.

### 6.1 Sycophancy

A sycophant is any “person who tries to win favor by flattering rich or powerful people”. Such excessive and insincere praise is a common ethical problem in journalism. According to Msike (2001), the sycophant journalist flatters political leaders, wealthy citizens and owners of media houses who are employers and who have formidable powers over journalists. A similar definition by Mbayo (2006) says: “*if someone is a sycophant, they flatter prominent people to gain advantage for themselves*”. BBC English dictionary also says sycophancy is the opposite of character assassination. Sycophancy in Nigerian journalism is apparently most glaring in the political sphere. Indeed, majority of the mass media in Nigeria and in many third world countries are owned by the government and, as a result, the media more often than not praise-sing the activities of government officials and government policies.

During elections, sycophancy leads to the abuse of the power of the mass media, while unethical journalists use the media to confer status and legitimacy on their favorite politicians. Writing on 126 years of the Nigerian press, Mike (2001), noted that “*Between 1976 and 1983, many a journalist sold his soul and his craft to*

*the highest political bidder or indeed to anyone who put up the bid.” Without exception, he observed, “government publishers Association of Nigeria formally ratified and gave impetus for the implementation of the new code.*

Below is the Code of Ethics of journalism in Nigeria:

1. Privacy: As a general rule, a journalist should respect the privacy of individuals and their families, unless it affects public interest.
  - a. Information on the private life of an individual or his family should only be published if it infringes on public interest.
  - b. Publishing of such information about an individual as mentioned above should be deemed justifiable only if it is directed at:
    - i. Exposing anti-social conduct
    - ii. Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of the individual concerned.
    - iii. Protecting public health, morality and safety.
    - iv. Exposing crime or serious misdemeanor.
2. Reward and Gratification
  - i. A journalist should neither solicit nor accept bribe, gratification or patronage to suppress or publish information
  - ii. To demand payment for the publication of news is inimical to the notion of news as fair, accurate, unbiased and factual report of an event.
3. Discrimination  
A journalist should refrain from making derogatory reference to a person’s ethnic group, religion, sex or to any physical or mental illness or handicap.
4. Ethical Independence  
Decisions concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of a professional journalist.
5. Children and Minors  
A journalist should not identify, either by name or picture or interview, children under the age of sixteen who are involved in cases concerning sexual offenses, crimes and rituals or witchcraft, either as victims, witnesses or defendants.
6. Privilege/Non-disclosure
  - i. A journalist should observe the universally accepted principle of confidentiality and should not disclose the source of information obtained in confidence.
  - ii. A journalist should not breach an agreement with a source of information Obtained as “off-the-record” as background information.
7. Violence  
A journalist should not present or report acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in a manner that glorifies such act in the eye's of the public.
8. Decency
  - i. A journalist should dress and comport himself in a manner that conforms With public interest
  - ii. A journalist should refrain from using offensive, abusive or vulgar language
  - iii. A journalist should not present lurid details, either in words or picture, of Violence, sexual acts, abhorrent or horrid scenes.
  - iv. In cases involved in personal grief or shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and discretion.
  - v. Unless it is in furtherance of the public right to know, a journalist should generally avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime.
9. Access to Information  
A journalist should strive to employ open and honest means in the gathering of information. Exceptional methods may be employed only when the public interest is at stake.
10. Plagiarism  
A journalist should not copy, wholesale or in part, other people’s work without attribution and/or consent.
11. Copyright
  - i. Where a journalist reproduces a work, be it in print, broadcast, art work or design, proper acknowledgement should be accorded to the author.
  - ii. A journalist should abide by all rules of copyright established by national and international laws and convention.

## 12. Public Interest

A journalist should strive to enhance national unity and public good

## 13. Press Freedom and Responsibility

A journalist should strive at all times to enhance press freedom and responsibility.

## 14. Social Responsibility

A journalist should promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace and international understanding.

## 15. Accuracy and Fairness

i. A journalist should refrain from inaccurate and misleading information.

Where such information has been inadvertently published, prompt correction should be made.

A journalist must hold the right of reply as a cardinal rule of practice.

ii. The public has a right to know. Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence.

iii. In the course of his duties, a journalist should strive to separate facts from conjecture and comment.

## 16. Collection of News

It is the duty of the journalist to strive to be open and honest in the gathering of information. He or she must employ all legitimate means in the collection of news and shall defend at all times the right to free access.

But no journalist shall employ unfair methods to obtain any information or news, or photographs or any documents, be they the property of individuals or the state or corporate bodies.

The code of ethics should therefore be the companion of the practicing journalist as well as the informed public in providing ethical guidelines, which practitioners should judge and be judged by in order to prevent, or at least reduce the cases of unnecessary sensationalism in Nigerian journalism.

## 7. Theoretical Framework

Looking at the critical but vital roles of the media in nation building in any democratic setting, this study is situated within the Social Responsibility Theory and Kant's Duty Law Theory.

### 7.1 Social Responsibility Theory

Social responsibility theory stresses the need to reconcile the independence of the press with obligation to the society. The theory outlines certain principles, which must be observed by the press. These include observing high professional standards of accuracy, objectivity, balanced information and truth. The press should be self-regulating within the framework of law and the established institutions in fulfilling its duty. The media should be pluralistic and reflective of the diversity of the society both in ownership and content. The media should avoid whatever may lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or offending the minority group (Mc Quails, 2005).

The social responsibility theory is therefore relevant to this research undertaking, as it helps in explaining how the media should be socially responsible in discharging its responsibility toward nation-building.

### 7.2 Kant's Duty Law Theory:

The Kant's duty law theory is derived from the deontological ethics, which hold that a good action should not depend on the result or consequence but on its intrinsic value, hence the adherents of the theory are called non-consequentialists. It also insists on personal commitment, for each person must rationally come up with his/her own values and must obey them.

An advocate of deontological ethics, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) formulated the duty ethics. He maintains that a good person is one who habitually acts right, and that a right action is that which is done from a sense of duty. In other words, duty ethics call on people to act from a sense of obligation. This obligation springs from reason rather than experience. This is what Kant calls the Categorical Imperative. Meanwhile, the Categorical Imperative principle enjoins one to "act on that maxim which you will to become a universal law." The decision to perform an act must be based on a moral law no less binding than such laws of nature as gravity. "Categorical" here means unconditional, without any experience. Right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions. What is morally right, we ought to do even if the sky should fall, that is despite whatever consequences may follow.

A good condition, according to Kant, is not good because it produces results, but rather because it is a moral action done from a sense of duty to the moral law. In the search for the intrinsic 'good', Kant did not believe that any outcome was inherently good. That is, pleasure or happiness may result out of the most evil acts. He also did not believe in "good" character traits, as ingenuity, intelligence, courage, etc. could also be used for evil. In fact, he used the term "good will" by which he meant the resolve to act purely in accordance with one's duty. He believed that using reasons, an individual could work out his/her duty.

This, of course, is the deontological theory of ethics, which is based on the philosophy that judging an

action as morally good or bad should not be viewed against the consequence of the action. The rationale of this theory is that, certain things are basically or intrinsically good and should be sought after without minding the consequences, and that we must act according to some laws, otherwise our actions are random and without purpose. As a result, rational beings most determine for result themselves a set of law which they will act.

## **8. Method**

These researchers adopt a qualitative method in carrying out this research. The researcher found this method appropriate because of the difficulties in reaching all the media houses in Kano State Data was gathered from related works of authors, which include text books, articles, magazines, paper presentations and human resources. Qualitative methodology is defined as a technique of knowledge generation through face to face contact between the researcher and the subject of the research. (Lindolf, & Taylor, 2011: Berg 2009)

### **8.1 Instruments or Tools Used in Data Collection**

The data were gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary data collection was based on the use of Focus Group Discussion, and in-depth interviews. For the secondary data, some relevant text books on communication study were used.

### **8.2 Population and Sampling**

The population of this research work is the media practitioners in Kano state

### **8.3 Sampling**

Purposive and convenient sampling methods were adopted for the Focus Group Discussion

### **8.4 Sample Size**

Fifty journalists made up the sample size for the Focus Group Discussions. At least in every media, the minimum number of respondents for the Focus Group Discussion was obtained. For the in-depth interview the sample size is eight. Two journalists from each of the media selected

### **8.5 The validity and reliability**

In an effort to ensure that reliability and validity are achieved, the researcher employed qualitative research and also recruited research assistant who were conversant with the profession of journalism. Notebooks and radio cassette recorders were used for taking notes and the audio recording of all the session. A fraction of the sample (5 percent) was also used to conduct a pilot study. In an effort to ensure credibility, the researcher employed the used of multiple methods of data collection. The used of Focus Group Discussion and in depth interview together with the review of existing works related to this study suggest that the topic was examined from different perspectives which would help build confidence in the findings:

## **9. Findings**

In the course of findings the causes of corruption in the media, a set of variables for the research topic The "Unethical Practices in the mass media: were designed. In such a way that respondents would be able to determine the factors responsible for unethical practices in the media.

Five media houses in the Kano metropolis were purposively selected this included Kano Radio, Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Kano, Freedom Radio, the Triumph Newspapers and the Daily Trust.

It can be deduced from the findings that respondents strongly disagree that journalists are well paid in Nigeria, while 31 percent react otherwise. Therefore, we can conclude that it is conspicuous Nigerian journalists' are not well remunerated. And this can be said to pose a constraint to the efficiency and effectiveness in their operations

In the same vein, majority of the respondents agree that there are laid down ethics for the Nigerian media, only few respondents have a contrary opinion. This establishes that there are laid down ethics, which journalists should follow. This research however has shown that they do not abide by those ethics, which has impeded their activities.

Invariably, during the focus group discussion and the in-depth interview respondents disagree that there is job security for journalists in Nigeria, while only few respondents have a contrary view. It is therefore evident that journalists in Nigeria are jeopardized, as there is no maximum security or protection for them. This of course prevents them from discharging their duties to the optimum.

Respondents also strongly agree that unethical practice of journalists place food on their table, whereas few of them view it otherwise. This suggests that journalists tend to deviate from the norms and values of the profession in order to enrich their pockets. This deviation has constituted a great obstacle to efficiency in the field of journalism.

Findings also revealed that some of the of journalists in Kano State practice unethically, while only few respondents are of different opinion. This presupposes that some journalists in Kano State are involved in this practice. This means that their activities are devoid of objectivity, and has caused the masses to have little or no confidence in their activities.

It is pertinent, however, to note that this trend in which the profession of journalism is bedeviled by corruption and sharp practices can be remedied. This is possible if the circumstances that push journalists to deviate from the norms and values of their profession and indulge in unethical practices, as the findings in this research have shown, are reversed. When the necessary measures are taken to reverse the present situation in the media, normalcy can be restored to the profession.

## 10. Summary

The paper studied and identified the reasons why most journalists are engaged in unethical practice, using the Kano State as a case study. Relevant literature was consulted with the purpose of getting accurate information, and to get acquainted with some of the works already done in the area by different people. The study was limited to media houses in the Kano metropolis.

## 11. Conclusion

Based on the summary above, the following conclusions are drawn:

Analysis of the data revealed that some of the journalists in Kano State are practicing unethically. It is evident from this study that subjectivity pushed journalists into unethical practice. Therefore, journalists should shun subjectivity and make objectivity their watchword. Reporters should avoid injecting personal opinions and views in their news reports. They should put down the facts as they are and also avoid being influenced by monetary value and other material factors. The international and local codes of conduct are always there to guide the journalist in his day to day practice of the profession. Journalists should as much as possible, shun combativeness. Destroying the polite in a bid to effect a change is not always the answer. Persuasive and prudent reporting should rather be the answer. It is responsible, accurate and decent reporting that will promote the profession of journalism and make it a noble one. It should be noted by every journalist that a good fighter lives to fight again.

## 12. Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are important: Remuneration for journalists is not commensurate with the hazards of the profession. The poor remuneration is not only responsible for the brown envelope syndrome, but also hinders the press from performing up to expectation. The employers of journalists should therefore ensure that remuneration for journalists is commensurate with the work they do.

Owners of media organizations should allow journalists to perform their duties according to the ethics of the profession.

Government should increase the salary of journalists and be compensated after years of service. Journalists should also follow the laid down laws and ethics of the profession and use them as guideline in their day to day activities. They should always have it in mind that they serve as a bridge between the government and the public.

Journalists are agenda setters and gate keepers, while the press is the fourth estate of the realm. Journalists to that extent concern themselves with the objective of gathering and disseminating information, which contribute to the development of any nation. The researcher therefore suggests that further research should be carried out on the problems of ethical issues in journalism and how these problems can be tackled and phased out in the society.

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