

A Review of Some Ethical Issues in Nigerian Journalism Practice: Afghanistanism, Character Assassination and Junk Journalism

Oberiri Destiny Apuke

Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Taraba State University, P.M.B 1157
Jalingo, Nigeria

Abstract

This study reviews some ethical issues in media practice in Nigeria: character assassination, junk journalism and Afghanistanism. The study made use of qualitative research method with the consultation of secondary sources such as books, journal articles and magazines. The study reveals among other things that Afghanistanism is the practice of concentrating on problems in distant parts of the world while ignoring controversial local issues, character assassination is damaging the reputation of an individual, while junk journalism otherwise known as sensationalism is the tendency to publish information that causes any interest or emotional reaction. Based on the study, these ethical issues are affecting journalism practice in Nigeria. The study recommends that sanctioning the defaulters of Afghanistanism, character assassination and junk journalism by NBC, NUJ, NPC will go a long way in curbing the menace of these practices among journalists.

Keywords: Afghanistanism, character assassination, junk journalism, ethical issues, media practice

Background to the Study

Like every other discipline. There are “dos” and “dons” in journalism practice. i.e, codes of conduct that guide the practitioners of the discipline. Here emphasis is given more on what should be avoided rather than what should be done. Ethics are rules or principles of behavior that are purported to guide actions (Marcel, 2009). Going by Marcel, things that violate the guiding principles are unethical and hence, should be avoided entirely.

There are quite many ethical issues in journalism practice but in this study, attention will be given to Afghanistanism, character assassination, and junk journalism. The study aims at reviewing their meanings, their practice in Nigeria, their effects or implications to Nigeria journalism practice and finally, proffer solutions.

Afghanistanism

Afghanistanism is the practice of concentrating on problems in distant parts of the world while ignoring controversial local issues. Robert M. Hutchins (1955) refers to it as the practice of referring always to some remote country, place, person, or problem when there is something that ought to be taking care of near at home, which is very acute. Going by their definitions, it can therefore be deduced that Afghanistanism is an unethical act in journalism professions or practice where journalist or media stations give attention more on foreign or far-away issues ignoring more pressing issues at home in order to divert attention. It is a political tool in which the government used to shift the attention of the public or masses from the pressing issues so as to be free from being attacked.

According to Asemah (2011) Afghanistanism is a term that is used to describe the situation where by journalist tend to focus on far away issues to the neglect of local issues. This implies that if a reporter of NTA Jalingo is busy reporting the birthday of the Osun state governor, child dedications of the member of the house of assembly in Benue state, while flood issues, crime issue, rape issues here in Jalingo are neglected such journalist is practicing Afghanistanism. Again Nigeria journalist who is often reporting event in united state, UK, Russia, Canada while neglecting issues of national or local interest is practicing Afghanistanism.

History

The term Afghanistanism was first used in 1948, when Jerkins Lioyed Jones seriously lampooned the soviet of American newspaper for paying more attention on problem of Afghanistanism instead more on American domestic problems (Asemah 2011). According to Asemah, Jones was the editor of Tulsa (Oklahoma) Tribune and since then the term came to be used in journalism.

Reasons Why Afghanistanism is Practiced in Nigeria

- i. According to Asemah (2011, p. 399) fear of tackling issues closer to the home is the reason for Afghanistanism.
- ii. Another reason is to divert the public attention from government public issue and policy. E.g. when much attention should be given on economic recession, denial of potential coppers from serving etc. much attention are given on reporting American politics and other irrelevant foreign issues.

Effect of Aghanistanism

- i. It devalues our country as citizens tend to know and discuss more of the foreign countries instead of our local or national issues.
- ii. It destroys surveillance roles of the media as citizens as no more informed or less informed about the societal issues.
- iii. It encourages corruption. Governments ill policies are not covered and as such, they enjoy free or no criticism of their poor governance.

Character Assassination

According to Asemah (2011) when the journalist damages the reputation of an individual, he is guilty of character assassination. This is an unethical and illegal practice. In most cases, government officials or rather politicians pay the media to do this on their behalf, destroying their opponent's images. Character assassination is a political tool used to vilify opponent's reputation before the right thinking members of the society. Character assassination is carried out in either calling people names (name calling) labeling and stereotyping. The contemporary issues of character assassination in Nigeria shall critically unveils the manifestation of the three mentioned above. Thus:

Contemporary Issues of Character Assassination in Nigeria

There are several issues of character assassination in Nigeria which are defamatory. It encompasses both written statement, known as "*libel*" and spoken statement known as "*slander*". Below are some of these issues in Nigeria.

The case of Dr. Peter Odili, the former governor of Rivers state seeking for six billion damages against Dakuku for defamation which resulted from a statement allegedly met by the defendant during the press conference in the state. It was alleged that the defendant after wike's Supreme Court victory, alleging that Wike during his victory thanksgiving service stated that Odili helped him to secure the Supreme courts victory. But Odili said what Dakuku said is false and malicious, as Wike never made such inference. But that Dakuku twisted and misrepresented what Wike said. (Case started proceedings 9:07am Tuesday presided by Justice Lamikanra adjourned the hearing on the suit to 27 of October 2016)

In 2014, APC chieftain, Alh. Bola Ahmed Tinubu instituted a hundred and fifty billion Naira (₦150,000,000,000) libel suit against African Independent Television (AIT) on the companies across Lagos purportedly owned by Tinubu describing him as Nigerian biggest Landlord. Although, the case was later settled out of court with huge apology tendered by AIT. Another case of slander in Nigeria was that of Orji Uzo-kalu the former governor of Abia in 2007 suit the traditional ruler of Uwani-Uno for slander, when the traditional describes Kalu's mother as criminally minded mother. Also issues of Ngozi Okonjo Iwala in Abuja when a journalist addressed her as "*Madam*", she sued him to court for slander because according to her "*Madam*" is a statues for market woman.

The former first Lady Nigeria Mrs. Dame Patience Jonathan, in her campaign during the 2015 presidential election in Calabar, described APC candidate President Muhammadu Buhari as a man without brain. The rumours about president Muhammadu Buhari's secondary school certificate which is still pending. Others are character assassination which include name calling. For instance, General Sani Abacha who was called '*Dark Goggle journal*', IBB (General Babangida) been described as evil genius. Stereotyping is also a form of character assassination. For example, Nigerians in the southern and eastern part of Nigeria, refer to Northerners as "*BOKO HARAM*". All these are political gimmicks and ethnic bigometric in order to tarnish their image because they are political weapons and a weapon of propaganda.

Junk Journalism

According to Levin (2000,p.18), cited in Asemah 2011), junk journalism otherwise known as sensationalism is the tendency to publish information that causes any interest or emotional reaction. According to Jodan.et al (1995:p137) in his book (contemporary issues in mass media practice) junk journalism also simple known as junk news, is a sardonic term for news stories that deliver "sensationalized, personalize, and homogenized inconsequential ,trivia especially when such stories appear at the expense of serious investigative journalism. Asemah (2011) who also calls it sensationalism says, it has to do with the system of journalism which places emphasis on unusual and bizarre things in the society. According to him, the newspaper does this by showing stories with gory pictures, paying attention to disgusting aspect of subject to play up its news stories.

Junk journalism is synonymous to junk news and sensationalism, as Jodan (1995) submits, it is often found in magazine. The aim is to arrest attention of the audience to read the stories there in the publication. Sensational stories are blown out of proportion to produce strong feelings of unusualness, shock and excitement, by using bold eye-gripping headlines, and various escapades to generate or report the news. A report that Jim lyke is a HIV carrier a popular Nollywood actor is quite an example of junk journalism or junk news. Another instance is when Genevive was reported to be dating with a top political figure in the north east of the nation,

Atiku Abubakar. No doubt this standard, these incidents are not newsy despite the personality involved. This is because; they lack public interest and impact. Putting modernization theory into practice, this state that the mass media should be used for communicating, messages that of development, McQuail (2005). It is obvious to note that junk news is more about celebrity gossip, sex news, (exposing actors or actresses then in) anniversaries of major events or celebrities e.t.c .

Brief History of Junk Journalism

According to Robert (2004) the term junk journalism was first used in print by Carl Jensen in March (1983) edition of penthouse. He was the leader of project censored. He had frequently faulted the media for ignoring importance stories.

Theoretical Frame Work

This study is anchored on the social responsibility theory of the press propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. The theory postulates that, the press is attached with freedom but must act responsible in carrying out fundamental functions of mass communication. McQuail (2005:172) encapsulates the basic tenets of the theory as follows: (i) the media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust. (ii) News from the media should be free but self regulated. (iii) the media should adhere to certain stipulated codes/ethics in order to guide its practices (iv) and in some circumstances, government could intervene to defend the public interest. Juxtaposing this study with the theory, a journalist is expected to shield himself away from junk journalism, Afghanistanism, and character assassination as this could disrupt his sense of social responsibility which calls for objectivity, fairness and adherence to codes of ethics guiding his practices. As Apuke (2016) puts it, an ideal journalist must be socially accountable to the audience.

Summary/conclusion/recommendation

Journalism is a profession that deserves respect, dignity and moral decorum. The ethics of the profession must not be disparaged or treated with impunity. This is why media regulatory body or council is established to protect the profession from the hands of fraudulent elements who use it to malign, cajole and arm-twist people including men of honor and integrity in order to get money and notoriety.

For quite some time now, the public has been served with information embodied with unethical activities treated with the activities. These media gate crushers have often relegated the media functions of information, education, entertainment and research to the background. As a result of their selfish political goal and vaulting ambition, they become willing tools for destruction. In their media contents, one hardly sees news, constructive report or research materials. Unfortunately, nobody seems to care about the ethical standard of the journalism profession in this part of the world. Sadly enough, the organizations and the people charged with the responsibility of checkmating irresponsible journalism in our society have become indolent and inactive because perhaps, their hands have also been soiled and therefore cannot live up to the challenges. This is one strong reason that accounts for the proliferation of junk media in recent time.

Against this backdrop, the study recommends that:

- i. Sanctioning the defaulters Aghanistanism, character assassination and junk journalism by NBC, NUJ, NPC will go a long way in curbing the menace of these practice among journalists.
- ii. Journalists should be conscious of teleological theory and apply it during their activities.

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