

The Context and the Imperative for Ethical Coverage of Local Government Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

Although local governments (LGs) form the lowest tier of governments in Nigeria, they are the tier closest to the people that should bring development to the hinterlands where the majority of her citizens live. This study examined, through library research, the functions and problems of LG councils in Nigeria plus the way in which LG elections are held with a view to establishing the need for ethical coverage of such elections. The study discovered that LG councils are saddled with heavy responsibilities by the 1999 constitution. They also face many difficulties, foremost among which is persistent underdevelopment occasioned by the strangling grip of state governors on LG finances and massive corruption among top LG officials. The study also found that LG elections are conducted in an irregular, phony and predictable manner with the ruling party usually sweeping the polls. It, therefore, recommended strict adherence to such ethical principles as editorial independence, accuracy and fairness, refusal of gratification and abhorrence of violence by reporters in the coverage of LG elections. It maintained that by so doing, journalists will help the public realise how important these elections at the grassroots are and with their combined vigilance, they will ensure that the current deplorable order in LG elections and the councils is dismantled.

Keywords: Ethics, Election, Local Government, Social Responsibility, Ethical Prescriptions

1. Introduction

Nigeria's democracy, though fraught with many challenges, is exhibiting the features of participatory government, a central element of which is the periodic conduct of elections. The role of journalists in publicising activities related to and ensuring smooth conduct of these elections cannot be overemphasised. However, in the discharge of their duties, media practitioners need constant reminding of the moral expectations they should meet.

As a result, this paper examines, through library research, the functions and problems of local government (LG) councils in Nigeria plus the way in which LG elections are held with a view to establishing the need for ethical coverage of such elections. The paper begins with examination of key concepts, followed by the theoretical framework. It proceeds with the significance and functions of LGs, problems faced by LGs and the trends in elections in Nigeria, particularly LG elections. Other sections contain ethical prescriptions for election coverage, actions to be taken to help journalists perform ethically and concluding remarks.

2. Examination of Key Concepts

2.1 Ethics

The term 'ethics' can be defined *inter alia* as "the value system by which an individual distinguishes what is right from wrong, fair from unfair or just from unjust" (Daramola, 2003; cited in Nwanne, 2008, p. 139).

Journalistic ethics, on its part, "would suggest the internal mechanism in journalism which enables the journalist to decide what actions or inactions are right or wrong and would therefore retard or advance the practice of journalism" (Nwanne 2008, p. 141).

Part of this internal mechanism is usually a code of conduct adopted by journalists which clearly stipulates how to make choices as occasions arise, rather than individual journalists depending solely on their discretion and respective moral compasses. The present code for journalists in Nigeria came into effect in 1998. There is a similar code for the West Africa Journalists' Association (WAJA) which came into being in 1986 and an international code of ethics for journalists formulated by the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in liaison with the International Organisation of Journalists (IOJ), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP), Latin American Federation of Journalists (LAFJ), Union of African Journalists (UAJ) and Confederation of Asian Journalists (CAJ). This code took effect in November 1983 (Asemah, 2011).

The stipulations in these codes of ethics can be traced to some time-tested ethical principles. Asemah (2011) illustrates how some of these principles are reflected in current ethical requirements for journalism practice.

- Aristotle's Golden Mean which advocates for moderation can be seen in the demand for balance in journalists' reports.

- The Judeo-Christian principle which is epitomised in the Biblical admonitions to ‘do unto others as you want them to do unto you’ and ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’ can be demonstrated by looking at invasion of privacy. A photojournalist who would want to be given some privacy in moments of intense grief or great personal loss should not pursue others in similar situations and photograph them repeatedly.
- Kant’s Categorical Imperative which speaks of universally applicable rules of correct behaviour which are self-evident and compelling can be applied to the need to eschew deception in news gathering or, we might add, to the need to protect news sources.
- Utilitarianism which calls for actions that will lead to the greatest happiness or benefit for the greatest number of people can be said to inspire investigative journalism to stop high-level malfeasance in the public and private sector, thereby bringing about great social good.
- Egalitarianism which advocates equal treatment for all regardless of age, religion, social status, race, sex and other distinguishing characteristics plays out in the demand for equal pay for equal work and, we add, in the call for gender-sensitive reporting.

These principles can, of course, be more broadly applied by journalists in the performance of their duties.

2.2 Election

An election, according to Hague and Harrop, ‘is a competition for office based on a formal expression of preference by a population. These opinions are then combined into a collective decision about which candidates have won’ (2001, p. 129). The collation of these expressions of preferences, commonly called votes, is carried out by an established body with the mandate to do so. This body in Nigeria is called the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Besides this national body, each of Nigeria’s 36 states has an independent electoral commission that organises elections at the local level.

Elections form an essential part of democracy because they provide the process through which the populace selects from itself persons to represent and lead it at various tiers of government both in the legislature and the executive arms of government. Besides this choice of rulers and representatives, elections play other roles such as apprising the public of problems in the polity and teaching people how to yield to the popular will, whether it aligns with theirs or not.

However, these roles can only be played when elections are properly conducted, that is, when they are competitive or free and fair as Hague and Harrop observe. They cite Canadian election observers, Gould & Jackson’s standards to be met for an election to be declared free and fair. Free means that human rights and freedoms such as free speech, freedom of association, freedom to register, to vote and to complain are upheld. Fair implies that the election was conducted ‘‘on a level playing field’’ and met requirements such as being administered in a non-partisan way, following the provisions of the electoral law, universal suffrage, accessible polling places and *balanced media coverage*.

Other requirements are:

- Equal access to resources for campaigns
- Open and transparent counting of the vote
- Equitable and non-coercive treatment of parties, candidates and electors by the government, the police, the military and the judiciary (Hague & Harrop, 2001, p. 130).

In fact, any comprehensive appraisal of the electoral process should start with the voter registration exercise till the last of the election complaints have been disposed of. In other words, voter registration should be seen to be free from irregularities, parties should practise internal democracy rather than foist favoured candidates on their members or stifle the political aspirations of women and the not-so-rich. Election petitions should also be scrupulously handled.

The implication of the foregoing is that unless elections are free and fair, voters have little chance of hearing or participating in robust discussions of local and national problems. They will have a slim chance of actually choosing their leaders and may resort to violence or civil disobedience because they feel disenfranchised. Politicians, on their part, will resort to money politics, *godfatherism* and also, violence. Those who get into office will practice impunity, probity and accountability forgotten. A country thus afflicted is a nominal, not a true democracy.

2.3 Local Government

The local government is the third tier of government following the federal and state governments. It is the tier of government closest to the people or, as Obi (2010, p. 1) describes it, ‘‘government at the grass root level’’. A portion of the definition by the United Nations’ Office for Public Administration is also helpful. It states that a local government is ‘‘a political sub-division of a nation or (in a federal system) state, which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs’’ (Cited in Ezeani, 2006, p. 25).

3. Theoretical Anchor

This study is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the press. This theory arose from the work of a commission of inquiry set up in the United States during the Second World War to look into the flagrant abuses of press freedom against the background of the prevailing libertarian ideology of media practice. The Commission, headed by the then Chancellor of Chicago University, Robert Hutchins, submitted its report in 1947 after five years of work. The report blamed the press for not providing views sufficiently representative of the diversity of opinions and social strata in society and of using its freedom as a licence for such irresponsible practices as sensationalism, partisanship and editorialisation. The media, the report cautioned, should not be the preserve of the rich and powerful but should cater to public interest through more inclusive and accurate reporting plus self-regulation, failure of which should attract government intervention (McQuail, 2010).

The main propositions of the Social Responsibility Theory as presented in McQuail (2010, p. 171) clearly show its relevance to this study:

- The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust
- News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant
- The media should be free, but self-regulated
- The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct
- Under some circumstances, government may need to intervene to safeguard public interest.

It is that respect for “agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct” that this paper is lending its voice to.

4. Significance and Functions of LGs

A broad definition of local government borrowed from the 1976 Guidelines for Reform of Local Government in Nigeria and presented in Ezeani (2009, p.11) sheds light on its importance. It goes thus:

Local government is government at the local level exercised through representative council established by law to exercise specific powers ... (These) powers should give the councils substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and determine and implement projects so as to complement the activities of the state and federal government in their areas, and to ensure, through active participation of the people and their traditional institutions that local initiatives and response to local needs are maximised (the word in brackets is mine).

Local governments exist to bring development to the grass roots, to mobilise the people to employ resources allocated to them and available within their jurisdiction to improve the social and economic well-being of the people. Some of their specific functions as spelt out in the Fourth Schedule to the 1999 Constitution are:

- Making recommendations to state bodies on economic planning on proposals pertaining to their areas
- Collection of rates and license fees
- Establishment and maintenance of ‘homes for the destitute and infirm’
- Construction and maintenance of roads, streets lights, drains and parks
- Street naming and house numbering
- Provision and maintenance of health services; primary, adult and vocational education; public conveniences, sewage and refuse disposal
- Registration of all births, deaths and marriages
- The development of agricultural and natural resources, excluding minerals.

As the closest tier of government to the people, LGs are better situated to identify the peculiar needs within their areas, to work in harmony with traditional rulers and community associations to harness available human capital and such natural resources as are within their authority to tackle those problems they can and seek state/federal aid for others. They should develop leadership potential among the local populace and provide two-way communication between local communities and government.

In the light of the foregoing, it is crucial that capable people who can bring positive change to the majority of Nigerians who have little access to the other two tiers of government be elected into the LG councils.

5. Challenges Faced by LG Councils in Nigeria

The biggest challenge faced by LGs in Nigeria is persistent underdevelopment. There are insufficient capital projects and limited maintenance of existing facilities leading to their dilapidation. There is also lack of provision of essential services/amenities and even non-payment of staff salaries for months at a time. In 2003, the then president, Olusegun Obasanjo, indicted the LGs for gross underperformance in almost all areas of their mandate (Cited in Ukertor, 2009).

Although many LG councils are located in rural areas where the level of poverty precludes the possibility of generating huge revenue, the problem is really exacerbated by deeply entrenched corruption on various fronts. What little the LGs make within their domain is not fully remitted by revenue collectors.

But what about allocations to LGs which have increased exponentially over the years? Data supplied in Ovaga (2009) show that such allocations increased from ₦19.3billion in 1993 to ₦1.3trillion in 2008, a jump of over seven thousand percent. Senator Uche Chukwumerije explains the situation thus:

It is true that local governments lose on the average about half of each monthly allocation to the predatory supervision of state governments ... to add insult to the robbery, the state governments withhold their statutory contributions of 10% of IGR to LGA. It is also true that local government politics is associated with the most primitive loot of public funds. Every local government parades a long line of ex-chairmen who became overnight millionaires but cannot equally boast of a long list of projects that have alleviated decades of underdevelopment.

He concludes that:

the aggravated poverty inflicted on the grassroots through the joint looting of the trinity of local government chairmen, their sponsors and state governments have introduced a new drag on the growth of democracy (The contribution of the local government system to the growth of our democracy, n.d.).

These accusations are corroborated by writers such as Olamilekan (2006) and Ovaga (2009). In fact, Ovaga (2009) describes the Association of Local Governments in Nigeria (ALGON) as a “toothless bulldog” in this regard unlike the “state governors that ... confront the federal government through the ... Governor’s Forum at the slightest provocation”.

Some commentators also point accusing fingers at councillors and public servants within the LG system on the matter of corruption (Coker & Adams, 2012; Fajonyomi & Owolabi, 2013). There cannot be meaningful development at the grassroots if this sordid situation is allowed to continue.

There is also the problem of overloading LGs with responsibilities as seen from their functions in the constitution. The payment of primary school teachers’ salaries alone is a colossal weight on LG finances (Ezeani, 2004). LGs also suffer from nepotism in personnel recruitment leading to indiscipline, incompetence, redundancy and absenteeism.

6. Trends in Elections in Nigeria

An apt description of elections in Nigeria can be seen in Ojo (2014)’s observation that, “Nigeria’s politics from independence has been tumultuous. Violence has continued to mar the conduct of ... elections making free and fair elections a *desideratum*.”

Elections were birthed in Nigeria through the Clifford Constitution of 1922. Only three positions were electorally contested into a legislative council of 46 members (Ikejiani & Ikejiani, 1986) but as the scope of elections broadened, especially with the 1959 general elections prior to independence in 1960, electoral violence began to grow by leaps and bounds. This violence takes the form of assassination of aspirants/candidates and intimidation of opponents; manhandling of electoral officials and polling agents; snatching of ballot boxes and other heinous acts.

Other problems plaguing elections in Nigeria include breaking electoral rules like voting by underage voters, inappropriate location of polling booths making it difficult to ensure secrecy of voting, voter apathy which is contradicted by high voter turnout figures for results released and other acts of complicity by electoral officials due to coercion or gratification by politicians. Although the 2015 general elections were generally adjudged an improvement on previous ones, there were still reports of problems like bloodshed (58 die in pre-election violence in Nigeria, 2015; Anthony, 2015), underage voting (Williams, 2015) and low voter turnout: “out of about 70m registered voters, only 29m came out to exercise their rights. That is just 41% of the registered voters” (Adeyinka, 2015).

LG elections are not different from other elections in the negative features cited so far. But the situation of LG councils is compounded by the lack of regularity of these elections. It appears that state governments in the Fourthth Republic prefer to have their minions running these councils as “a mere extension of the state secretariat or the State Ministry of Local Government” in the form of caretaker or transition committees as in previous republics (Aluko, 2010).

This practice introduces serious prejudice into elections when they are eventually held leading to the control of virtually all the LGs in each state by the ruling party there. According to Aluko (2010),

Since 1999, this has been achieved in many states in Nigeria and it has prepared a breeding ground for bad governance and large-scale corruption. In essence, even when elections are organised, the whole electoral process is a mere gimmick and the ruling parties never fail.

Chukwumerije confirms this rape of democracy in these words:

The fallacy of LG elections in the states is clearly demonstrated by the fact that a state government or ruling party wins, as a rule, all the contested seats in local government elections within the state. In rare cases of generosity, the incumbent authorities allocate, as a credibility ploy, one or two seats to the opposition.

He adds that in the event that the state government falls into the hands of another party, “the new state regime ... re-enacts the magic of sweeping the polls in all subsequent local government elections”.

Unfortunately, recent efforts at granting the LGs autonomy through a constitutional amendment in order to redress these anomalies were scuttled at the level of the state houses of assembly after sailing through the National Assembly (Tabiowo, 2014).

This is the context within which LG elections are conducted in Nigeria, a situation that can only perpetuate the poverty and backwardness in which many LG councils in the country are trapped.

7. Ethical Prescriptions for the Coverage of Future LG Polls

Journalists are indispensable in the pursuit of success for the electoral process anywhere in the world (Kur, 2005). Their tasks of providing information and interpretation on the electoral process, candidates and relevant issues help the public to make necessary political judgment (Ekeanyanwu & Olaniyan, 2010). Their ability to play these roles depends, to a large extent, on their respect for the ethics of their profession.

Our frame of reference for the discussion henceforth will be the Code of Conduct for Nigerian Journalists adopted in 1998. We are focusing on the sections we deem relevant to this discourse. Quotations will be lifted from its presentation in Nwabueze (2009). Journalists should also familiarise themselves with the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage ratified in Dec. 2014. This code was framed with the aid of development partners like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UKaid and “has been adopted by the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) and six other media associations (The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage, 2014).

The preamble to the Code of Conduct for Nigerian Journalists admonishes journalists to earn and maintain public trust and serve the public interest through adherence to “the highest professional and ethical standards” (p. 419). The body of the code specifies how this can be done.

7.1 Editorial Independence

The code stipulates on this subject that, “Decisions concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of a professional journalist” (p. 419). But we know that in Nigeria and elsewhere, media are often established to push the political interests of their owners. Ekeanyanwu (2007) cites, among other examples, Zik group of newspapers founded by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and *National Concord* by Chief M. K. O. Abiola. Today, we have as examples *The Nation* newspaper owned by Alhaji Bola A. Tinubu, the *Leadership* newspaper owned by Sam Ndah-Isaiah and numerous government-owned media. However, journalists who surrender the determination of news content to their owners are clearly violating this provision.

A political education manual published by the National Orientation Agency (NOA) reminds “journalists who work in government-owned media ... that it is the Nigerian people who are the ultimate owners of such media. Their fundamental loyalty ought, therefore, to be to the people rather than to any government in power” (p. 142).

7.2 Accuracy and Fairness

i. 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.

ii. A journalist should refrain from publishing 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.

iii. In the course of his duties, a journalist should ensure to separate facts from conjecture and comments (p. 419).

Sadly, on this point, the mass media have been condemned by many. Lamenting the decline of professionalism in journalism, George Langford, public editor of *The Chicago Tribune*, was once quoted as pointing to “a rash of incidents in which journalists had been ‘accused ... of lying, stealing, racing into print with inadequately sourced stories and abusing the anonymous-source crutch’ ” (Cited in Itule & Anderson, 2008, p. 143). “Where is the integrity in rushing to release updates without verification and publishing contradictory information shortly after without any apology? How can the confidence of media consumers be maintained in that type of situation?” (Ohaja, 2014, p. 8).

With respect to elections, therefore, the candidates for various parties should be given a chance to be heard and the electorate should be given truthful accounts about candidates, parties and activities taking place. Journalists should not present speculation and unsubstantiated assertions/viewpoints with such certitude that the undiscerning mistakes them for fact. In this way, the electorate will be empowered to make the right choices come election day.

7.3 *Privilege and 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 'off-the-record' or as 'background information' (p. 420).

Journalists who uncover sensitive information in the course of their work should protect their sources. Politics in Nigeria is often, if we might use the cliché, a do-or-die affair. So exposing the names of sources who, for instance, reveal plans to rig elections could expose them to mortal danger. This is actually where the rubber meets the road. The journalist in this position may suffer serious repercussions but that is a known hazard of the job.

In addition, the desire to score a scoop should not make a journalist to use information obtained as background in a more explicit manner as it might ruin the prospects of his source if he is an aspirant or contestant in the polls.

7.4 *Privacy*

"As a general rule, a journalist should respect the privacy of individuals and their families unless it is in the public interest" (p. 419). Stalking political aspirants and electoral officers in hopes of catching them in criminal acts is not part of the job description except where there is solid intelligence that wrongdoing is imminent. Initiating private conversations with major actors in the electoral process and goading them to make admissions that implicate them for use in stories is highly improper.

7.5 *Decency*

- i. A journalist should refrain from using offensive, abusive and vulgar language.
- ii. A journalist should not present lurid details, either in word or picture, of violence, sexual acts, abhorrent or horrid scenes. In cases involving personal grief and shock, enquiries should be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and discretion.
- iii. Unless it is in the furtherance of the public right to know, a journalist should generally avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime (p. 420).

As has been stated earlier, journalists often fight to help their employers achieve their political ambitions and labour to scuttle the aspirations of their opponents. This is often done in the most sickening and reprehensible manner with the employers painted as marble saints and the opponents denigrated in the vilest language possible. Criticism, where necessary, should be composed in a constructive manner without disrespecting the subject. The language of journalists should never be seen to be in bad taste.

The same applies to the coverage of any form of barbarity that occurs during the electoral process. Graphic description of violent acts and their aftermath plus the presentation of images therefrom is capable of offending the sensibilities of many members of the public and brutalising the impressionable ones. Also, people who become victims of election violence should not be pestered by journalists. They should be allowed to compose themselves somewhat before answering questions and taking pictures.

In addition, journalists should not overextend themselves in a bid to link politicians, parties or electoral officials with criminals or people suspected of wrongdoing. In other words, do not fabricate the means with which to discredit them.

7.6 *Discrimination*

"A journalist should refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnicity, geo-political zone, religion, sex or to any physical or mental illness or handicap" (p.420). In the coverage of a political aspirant, what matters is the individual's qualifications and track record which point to his/her ability or inability to occupy the post sought. Playing up ethnic, religious and sexist sentiments obfuscate the choice for the electorate and saddle the people with misfits who achieve nothing in office. Respect for this section, will enable journalists prevent such politicians from riding to power on the people's ignorance and prejudices.

7.7 *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 a fair, accurate, unbiased and factual report of an event (p. 421).

Money politics is the order of the day in Nigeria. Gratifications will flow in the coverage of elections, no doubt, from politicians who want the news to be slanted in their favour and want journalists to ignore their failings. Journalists should refuse to co-operate with people who offer them such Greek gifts.

Journalists should be aware of the distinct difference between their mission and that of politicians. In the words of Schulte (1981), “the politician is seeking power and attempting to secure it, often through popular election. The journalist is engaged in seeking out and publishing the truth” (p. 287). Anything that would make the journalist apathetic in the search for and publication of truth, whatever will cajole him/her into tainting the truth, can amount to helping the politician compromise the integrity of the electoral process. However, for a journalist to fish for dirt with which to blackmail political actors and to initiate the horse trading is evidence of a moral blight on himself/herself and the profession.

7.8 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 acts in the eyes of the public” (p. 421). Politicians who harass their opponents and commit other dastardly acts in the pursuit of power should never be treated as heroes. Where they bear such titles that celebrate their brazenness in intimidating and injuring their rivals like Naked Wire, journalists should never address them as such knowing that the implication is that the media condone or even encourage such savagery. Neither should those who terrorise others with magic or occult powers during elections be honoured for that. The media should also refuse to serve as a forum for pompous show of wealth in the midst of palpable poverty or the avenue through which ordinary people will be invited to receive a pittance and sell their franchise.

7.9 Access to Information

“A journalist should strive to employ open and honest means in gathering information. Exceptional methods may be employed only when the public interest is at stake” (p. 421). This means that impersonation, stealing of files and other forms of deception are uncalled for. Journalists using unorthodox means to get information often get only part of the picture and whatever conclusions they arrive at from that are put to question when the whole picture is revealed.

7.10 Public Interest

“A journalist should strive to enhance national unity and public good” (p. 421).

7.11 Social Responsibility

“A journalist should promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace and international understanding” (p. 421).

These sections imply that journalists should watch to ensure that parties choose their candidates in an egalitarian manner; that people are actually allowed to exercise their franchise and that political actors uphold the provisions of the electoral law. They also mean that journalists should not foment or escalate electoral crisis by publishing misleading reports, throwing about wild allegations and sensationalising conflicts.

Furthermore, they should not usurp the power of the electoral commission by announcing results and they should not incite people to take to the streets to protest election results. We know how rapidly peaceful protests can degenerate into looting, burning or killing sprees.

Where crisis erupts, journalists should contribute to a restoration of sanity and calm by appealing to the people’s better judgment and directing those with grievances to seek appropriate legal remedies.

7.12 Plagiarism

“A journalist should not copy, wholesale or in part, other people’s work without attribution and/or consent” (p. 421). In this era of digital connectedness, there is a preponderance of so-called news sources on the Internet spewing out stories by the minute. In a bid to give the latest information to their targets, journalists often depend on these online sources whether they are traditional news media sites, blog spots or other online news sites. And they sometimes neglect to attribute the information so published to the source.

Part of the problem is that there is so much copying going on across the Internet that it may be difficult to trace the originator of the message. However, the ethical requirement is that journalists should not use other people’s stories without giving credit to the sources, irrespective of whether they use such stories verbatim or they paraphrase/summarise them. Attempts should also be made to verify the Internet material they want to use in their stories through both virtual and non-virtual sources (Patterson and Wilkins, 2008). This is because a lot of these stories turn out to be false and when journalists with respectable, traditional media ‘steal’ them, they cloth them with an undeserving garb of authenticity, thereby misleading their readers/audience.

In the coverage of elections, journalists should be especially wary of polls purportedly conducted to determine candidates’ approval ratings and computations that claim to show who has won when election results are still being announced. Some of these are not based on research but are planted by public relations hacks to boost their

clients' popularity and dwindle their opponents' following or to create suspicion of bias/wrongdoing by electoral officials should their clients lose.

8. Recommendations to Facilitate Journalists' Adherence to Ethical Coverage of Elections

- Provision of job security for journalists, especially those with government media. This includes the pursuit of legal relief and compensation for journalists who are wrongly dismissed.
- Sanctioning of private media owners, especially in the print arm, who have a penchant for owing their staff arrears of salaries for many months. Such destitution of journalists pushes many into compromising the ethics of their job for pecuniary gains.
- Improved remuneration for journalists to provide basic comfort for them and their families and strengthen them to resist the temptation of accepting gratification.
- Insurance cover for journalists to be worked into their emolument packages due to the hazardous nature of the job.
- Constant retraining to challenge journalists who are becoming set in their wrong ways.
- Organisation of awards for journalists who have distinguished themselves by standing up for the ideals the profession is built on.
- Commitment to good governance, the rule of law and transparency by government at all levels to give meaning to Nigeria's democracy and not frustrate journalists who set out to do their jobs well.

Most of the things listed above require the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ)/Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ) working in concert with government and organisations seeking to promote vibrancy and robustness in journalism.

9. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen the awesome responsibilities placed on the shoulders of LGs by Nigeria's 1999 Constitution and the abysmal failure that has been recorded in their performance of these responsibilities. We have also seen the culpability of the state governments and the principal officers of LGs in this sorry situation.

Furthermore, we have seen the shoddy manner in which LG elections have characteristically been conducted and allegations levelled against the mass media in their coverage of politics and elections.

To cap this discourse, we have provided some prescriptions for ethical coverage of elections using the current Code of Conduct for Nigerian Journalists as our benchmark and some actions that should be taken by stakeholders to encourage ethical performance by journalists.

It is hoped that a sincere effort will be made by Nigerian journalists as social reformers to salvage the deplorable situation in the LG councils in the country. It is hoped that they will play their watchdog role and refuse to be compromised or intimidated. It is hoped that they will sensitise the people to the functions of LGs so that they do not feel elections at that level are not worth their time and they will partner with the press to overturn the reprehensible status quo in their areas.

It is further hoped that journalists will insist that the candidates in LG elections map out their blueprints for improving the lot of their councils if elected; that they will thus challenge them to properly acquaint themselves with their constituencies and fully identify with them. It is hoped that the press will keep electoral officers and law enforcement agents on their toes to discharge their duties professionally and equitably.

In sum, it is hoped that it will be far from business as usual in future LG elections in Nigeria.

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