

Popularity vs Ethics: Mutually Exclusive Ideals for the Media?

Ngozi Okpara, PhD.

School of Media and Communication (SMC)

Pan-Atlantic University, Km 52 Ajah/Epe Express Road, Ibeju-Lekki, Lagos.

Abstract

Across the ages, the media has evolved to become a critical tool of mass communication through its focal objectives of information, entertainment and education. With globalisation and the mixing of diverse cultures came the challenge of ethics. This arose from the fact that what is right for one culture might be wrong for another. This necessitated the need to take a second view on ethics in relation to popularity and see how these two concepts can intertwine in promoting a healthy media ecosystem. Leveraging an exploratory approach and relying on a critical review of relevant literature as well as narrative analysis of observation of contents of the Big Brother reality TV show, the study concludes that the media should be aware of its impact on the lives of its audience and make its content as humanly positive and uplifting as possible. The paper further posits that an ethical and morally upright media will cultivate a conscious and knowledgeable audience/consumer group. Finally, the study confirms that social responsibility is central to cultivating an engaging and active audience, and when the media perform their functions in a way that respects and upholds the dignity of the audience, media consumers will better understand themselves and the society they live in, and they will, in turn, appreciate the media more.

Keywords: Ethics, Media ethics, Popularity vs.Ethic, Exclusive ideals

DOI: 10.7176/RHSS/9-24-11

Publication date: December 31st 2019

1.0 Introduction

The media¹ is a powerful instrument of mass communication. From a functional perspective, the media serves as the go-between between the originator of a message (sender) and the public. The media is the ear of the people, providing the means for the public to stay informed, entertained and educated (source). Through the media, people feel the pulse of society and keep abreast with what is happening or even predict what may happen in the future. Over the years, discourse within the academia and the research community have focused on arriving on an ideal function of the media. While different communication scholars provide insights as to what they think the functions of the media should be (Lasswell (1948), Wright (1986), Schramm (1964), McQuail (2000)), these functions have been summarised to incorporate education, information and entertainment [discussed extensively in subsequent sections].

The greatest challenge for media producers, especially in modern times, remains understanding the right thing to do and doing it. For instance, which functions should the media prioritise? What do media consumers want and how do the media satisfy them while upholding media responsibilities and ethics? What contents should the media promote in a way that covers operational costs and stimulate profitability?

Scholars argue that despite structural changes in the media landscape resulting in commercialisation, increasing competition, decreasing public spirit, the media as a social institution should still be accountable and socially responsible to the public (Bardoel & D'Haenens, 2004). Yes, entertainment sells. People rely on entertainment from the media to cope with the realities of their lives and are more likely to consume them and be swayed by them (Vorderer, 2001). But should the media sacrifice the educational and information role for entertainment and profitability?

This work explores this dilemma theoretically by attempting to deconstruct the arguments put forward for media popularity and professionalism in the media, with the intent to propose a more viable solution to this conflict. The framework of this study is situated in the media dependency theory as well as ethical principles and values. The study covers the traditional media of mass communication explicitly.

2.0 Conceptual Framework

The following vital terms used recurrently in this study or essential for following the arguments in this paper are conceptually defined below.

Media

Media, as defined by McQuail (2010), is a collective term for “the organised means of communicating openly, at a distance, and to many in a short space of time.” McQuail notes further that the key features of mass communication include: “their capacity to reach the entire population rapidly and with much the same information, opinions and entertainment; the universal fascination they hold; their stimulation of hopes and fears in equal measure; the presumed relation to sources of power in society; the assumption of great impact and influence.”

¹ We use media in this work as a singular term for all means of mass communication.

In the 21st century, the function of mass communication is not only performed by traditional media but the new media. However, this study focuses on the traditional media, especially the electronic media (specifically the TV) because the study was inspired by the observation of the increasing marketing of Reality TV shows as forms of entertainment in a bid to gain popularity.

Ethics

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with values relating to the conduct of the human person with respect to the “rightness” or “wrongness” of specific actions (Okpara, 2016, Udeze, 2012). As an essential construct of civilisation which emerged out of the innate human need to comprehend the world (Boone, 2017), ethics enables people to interrogate their actions and decisions and to ask questions regarding such decisions. It brings to the fore the idea that human beings do not just take actions; they take actions deliberately, and it is in the process of deliberating over their actions that they try to decide whether a specific action is ethical (morally right) or unethical (morally wrong). In relation to media practice, Philip (2010) defines ethics as ‘the rational thoughts by media practitioners when they are faced with the difficult choice of deciding between two or more competing moral choices’. This position was affirmed by Okunna (1995), where she suggests that as moral philosophy, ethics incorporates that branch of knowledge concerned with the standards of good and bad behaviour.

Across the diverse societies that make up the world, there exist a set of rules and regulations that guide human behaviour and how people relate with each other. These set of standards are often referred to as ethical principles. Concisely, these are guides for making ethical judgments. These principles are learned and imbibed over time. Some ethical principles include prudence, justice, temperance, courage, and the common good.

Each profession has a set of ethical principles that guide human conduct in that profession, so that adherence to these principles is regarded as professionalism. When one is said to be professional, it is living up to the values of one’s chosen profession. In the case of the media, some peculiar ethical principles: truth, fairness, objectivity, balance, accuracy, impartiality, etc.

Media popularity

Media popularity, in this work, is defined as the situation where a media agency is liked by the majority of the people. This is often achieved by promoting contents that appeal to a broad audience. In this work, we conceptualise media popularity as a state attained through the performance of specific responsibilities/functions which make people dependent on the media.

3.0 The Problem

The media is a powerful social institution that wields a strong influence in society. As a social institution, the media is a source of reliable information, education and research. But it can also misinform and misguide with the same breath with which it informs and guides. Hence, it can be a force for good or bad, whichever it chooses, with a wide range of intended and unintended consequences (McQuail, 2010).

To gain popularity and followership, media organisations have had to jettison professionalism and ethics. Reality TV shows in Nigeria, Big Brother Nigeria, for instance, brazenly promote sexually explicit contents. This generates a large following and conversations on social media as young people like to talk about sex and experience it (source). These contents, often broadcast to young viewers, consciously or unconsciously influence them. In doing this, media organisations violate the ethics of “do no harm.” But what exactly qualifies as indecent since there are cultures where people go about naked!

Popularity is desirable, no doubt. Who wants to run a business without sales and returns? Feeding media consumers what they crave most boosts popularity and advertising revenue in the short-run, but what happens in the long-run? Is this model of operation sustainable, and is it worth tossing away ethical principles and values? Most importantly, is there any chance that such media practice can be detrimental to the success of such media houses? This work answers this question, arguing for a model that incorporates both popularity and ethics into the core of media practice.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

At the core of the foundation of this study is the media dependency theory and the normative theories of Aristotle (Virtue ethics) and Immanuel Kant (Deontology). The media dependency theory put forward by Sandra Ball-Rockeach and Melvin Defleur (1976), explains how people who rely on the contents provided by the media become dependent on the media for the fulfilment of their needs. People rely on the media for information, education, entertainment, etc., and the more a person depends on the media for these reasons, the more critical the media becomes to them. This theory helps to explain the symbiotic relationship that exists between the media and the person. When the media provides the contents that a person likes and needs, the person becomes dependent on the media, and as such, becomes a follower of the media. In this way, the media becomes popular amongst such persons and survives by producing contents that will continually make these person media dependent. This is how the media achieves popularity.

On the other hand, Aristotle’s virtue ethics proposes that virtue is a habit that can be learnt, and learning

occurs through practice (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). The individual has some inherent traits that should be developed, Aristotle's virtue ethics put forward, and the human person can build up moral character over time through consistent practice and action (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). Aristotle believed that an ethical person is a man of virtues, and that virtue is the mean between two extremes. One must find moderation, which is the mean between two extremes because extremism is unethical. He isolated four cardinal virtues which a moral person had to acquire and practice to live a fulfilled life: prudence (wisdom), fortitude (courage), temperance (moderation) and justice. By extension, instead of just focusing on action or consequences, media practitioners and media audiences can cultivate good characters (virtues) so that they know what is right and do it.

Kant, however, offers a different perspective. He sees morality as a species of practical rationality, providing a test of the latter (McNaughton & Rawling, 2006, p. 436). According to Kant, people have the unconditional moral duty to do the right thing at all times (the categorical imperative). Doing good is not dependent on a person's inclination, position or purpose. It is only through dutiful actions that people can be moral (Butts & Rich, 2013). Kant draws attention to respect for the dignity of the human person, universality of actions and goodwill.

Aristotle's virtue ethics theory and Kant's deontology (together with the media dependency theory) constitute the framework upon which this work is built. This is because the application of these theories helps provide the basis for the practice of ethics in the media, and it is crucial to prioritise the promotion of the dignity of the human person in the production of media contents. Persons in the media must practice ethics and promote this through the contents they disseminate to help people find true happiness and fulfilment – because according to Aristotle, the practice of ethics leads ultimately to happiness.

5.0 Method

This study is purely exploratory and relies on the review of relevant literature as well as narrative analysis of observation of contents of reality TV shows with specific reference to the Big Brother reality TV show.

6.0 The Big Brother Nigeria Reality Game Show

Big Brother Naija, which was known at inception as Big Brother Nigeria is a television reality show anchored in Nigeria by Multichoice Nigeria and based on the Big Brother global franchise. The show involves 12 – 14 young men and women who are placed in an isolated house with a promise to win cash prizes of up to N21,000,000.00 as far as they can leverage on specific skills to avoid being evicted from the house. The first season was aired between March 5 and June 4, 2006. The show is in its fourth season. According to Onikoyi & Fadeyi (2019), the show which focuses primarily on entertaining its teeming audience has a multiplier effect on the nation's economy with significant impact on telecoms, entertainment, fashion, tourism and hospitality industries. It also affords local and international brands the much-needed opportunity to reach a wider audience.

Irrespective of the economic benefits as highlighted above, the opinion holds that the Big Brother Reality TV show constitutes a culture shock to the Nigeria audience as it exposes the viewers to cultures strange to the predominantly conservative Nigerian people. Traditional institutions hold that for a man and woman to live together in the same room, they must be traditionally married. But the Big Brother TV showcase consistently showcases nudity, sex and acts considered as immoral.

The big dilemma, therefore, is whether cultural values and norms should be sacrificed for economic benefits and vice versa. The 2018 edition of the Big Brother show attracted over 170 million votes for N30.00 per vote. This translates to about N5.1billion. When you consider the revenue accruing from product placements and support from corporate bodies, it is clear that the show is a revenue spinner.

7.0 Popularity in the Media

The popularity of the media stems from the functions the media perform in society. Media organisations will only be as popular as their usefulness in helping people understand themselves and the community they live in. Lasswell (1948) identified three functions that the media should perform in the society: surveillance of the environment, correlation of different responses and transmission of social/cultural heritage. According to Lasswell, the correlation function entails that the media keep up surveillance of all events in the world and provide information to the human persons in society. The media should ideally cover a variety of issues and maintain social order as well as facilitate innovation, adaptation and progress. The correlation function requires that the media must explain and interpret the meaning of events in such a way that helps people make sense of what is happening around them, and the transmission function entails that the media communicate values and norms and ensure its transfer from one generation to the next.

Wright (1960) identified an additional media function: entertainment. According to him, the media should help reduce tension and anxiety in society by providing amusement and forms of relaxation. By providing contents that help people escape from the stress of everyday life, the media makes living a lighter journey for persons. Schramm (1964) suggested four functions which are harmonious with the functions already advanced by Lasswell and Wright. McQuail (2005), however, identified another unique function of the media: the mobilisation function

of the media. He viewed media as performing an additional function in bringing people together for collective action on a particular issue. The media, he argued, has a responsibility to make people see a problem that exists and to also bring them together in one spirit to find solutions to that problem. The media can thus be a means for campaigning for societal objectives or against social problems in education, politics, development, religion, environment, personal and family issues, etc.

A media organisation that performs the above functions will appeal to audiences because people need the media to make sense of their existence as individuals and as a group. When the media consistently offer value (information, education and entertainment, etc.) to people, it is possible to attract and retain followers. Popularity is achieved by providing meaningful and useful content consistently, not by focusing only on short term gains.

8.0 Ethics and Professionalism in the Media

According to John Locke, man is an intelligent thinking being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself. This is what makes man different, and it is this attribute that confers on man the position of a superior being on earth. Consequently, man should command respect from the media. The media must uphold man's dignity through their contents, and raise the bar to the highest possible standards in such a way that they remind man of the essence of his being, of who he is, and how to achieve his potentials to be happy, peaceful and secure. Furthermore, man is a social being. He interacts with others to learn about himself and to be his best possible self. The media has a role to play here because good social interaction will produce good institutions in society. The media, through their contents, socialise human persons to become useful members of society.

As a social creature, the human person encounters many dilemmas. Knowledge of ethics will help him to take ethical decisions because the human person is shaped by his choices. Persons who work in the media must do well, with the knowledge of media dependency theory, virtue ethics and deontology, to make the right choices for the common good of everybody. When they make the right choices and think carefully about the kinds of contents to promote to their audience, they will uphold the dignity of their viewers.

The media can help in harm prevention by upholding the do no harm principle of media ethics. Persons in the media must continuously think about the harm that the contents they offer do to their viewers. Harm can be inflicted on a person's soul when harmful contents are exposed to such a person, especially when the person does not live the principles of ethics or does not have moral formation. When exposed to toxic contents, such a person can lose his essence and purpose.

According to Pepple & Acholonu (2018), efficient and effective media practice and journalism are driven, in no small extent, by strong ethical values which facilitate professionalism. At variance to expectations and global best practices, the state of media practice in Nigeria is not commendable and thus necessitated the setting up of diverse regulatory bodies to curb the trend (Tseguy & Asemah, 2014). These agencies include the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE), Newspaper Proprietors of Nigeria (NPN) and many others.

Persons in the media have the responsibility to remind man of his essence, of the purpose of his existence. The concern is usually that they will risk patronage and popularity. However, knowledge and use of ethical principles can lead to organisational success as the organisation will find its audience, people who share the same philosophy. Consistency in producing good content can also serve to win more viewers. Considerations of popularity and profitability are not enough reasons to jettison professionalism and ethics in the media.

9.0 Popularity vs Ethical Media: Mutually exclusive ideals?

It has been observed that media practitioners often sacrifice ethics on the altar of popularity. In the bid to gain followership and patronage, persons in the media throw caution to the wind, thinking only about what sells best. There is usually no consideration for the dignity of the human person consuming the content who should be reminded of his essence and how to make his life have more meaning. This can often be traced to imposing factors such as the quest for profit making, poor remuneration of journalists, the dominant influence of media owners, competition, and pressure from changing society.

Notwithstanding, the media, as an institution, has an obligation to the people. It has a responsibility to ensure that people live their very best lives, that the sanity of the society is preserved, that people see themselves in the true light of their being – as rational beings who have body and soul. Focusing on the short term gain of popularity is akin to abandoning its first responsibility. But the media does not have to trade popularity for professionalism and ethics. The two can co-exist. Practising ethics and diligently performing the functions of the media, a media organisation can find its audience. It does not have to run after everyone. Over time, it will gain more followership, but this will come from consistent delivery of meaningful and innovative content.

Ethical media organisations positively champion advancement in health care, neuroscience, technology, computing, nanotechnology, and learning, enabling the people in the society the ability to expand their physical and mental faculties positively for the good of the society. They drive innovation. They uphold the dignity of the human person while driving societal change and progress. Unethical media organisations, on the other hand, are

typically focused on short term gains and profiteering. They do not have a sustainable business strategy for long term growth and social, civic responsibility. They follow new social trends that do not have meaningful content, that lack innovation and creativity. Unethical media organisations are plagued with poor decision making over media content, placement and management.

Ethical media companies do not only promote ethical media business standards and practices internally and externally; they engrave into their core the theory of “social-conscious capitalism.” They encourage this in everything they do, in every member of staff hired and every new partner they bring into their social and business network and all media contents pushed to the public, to ensure they deliver long-term value to stakeholders including customers, government regulators and investors. Operating an ethical media organisation does not come at the cost of popularity; instead, it drives popularity. It draws its audience. It changes people, reminds people of what they should be doing, how they should be living. It requires a clear understanding of the functions of the media and the ability to stay uninfluenced by pressures from changing lifestyles and competition from other media. In the end, achieving both professionalism and popularity in the media requires:

- Awareness of the audience and consumer needs and sensitivity to the essence of the human person.
- Less focus on short term gains and profiteering, and more emphasis on long-term growth and social responsibility.
- Diversification, looking for alternative sources of funding to be more independent and free.
- Respect for the dignity of every stakeholder – staff, customers, regulators, investors, everyone.
- Alignment of practice with the *social responsibility theory*.
- Ethics, the practice of the principles of media ethics and Aristotle’s four cardinal virtues.
- Innovation, providing innovative content through an innovative medium. This will require integrating the features of the traditional media with the new media, taking the positive elements of the traditional media (ethics and professionalism) and fusing them with the positive features of the new media (participatory, interactive and high speed). Ethical and popular media should be able to cater to a wide range of audiences with varying interests.

10.0 Recommendations

The quest for professionalism in the media and practice of ethics while striving to gain popularity is an understandably challenging task. It is easier to focus on one function of the media which people love the most (entertainment), entice people with uncensored nude pictures and scenes, and make people watch specific programmes because it appeals to their emotions. But appeal to emotion is not enough. It is not ideal. Human beings have both body and soul, and the media must engage the intellect as well as the emotion and uphold the dignity of the person – both of the people being viewed and the ones doing the viewing.

Accordingly, journalists should be trained on ethics so that they, human persons themselves, understand the essence of man and communicate that through the media. There should be training programmes on creativity and innovation as well to encourage them to think out of the box. New media contents require fresh ideas and fresh minds, more importantly, pure ethical thoughts.

In addition to the above, there is a need to strengthen regulation in the media. In this age of new media, the importance of self-regulation cannot be better emphasised. Persons who work in the media should practice virtues together with the understanding of Kant’s deontology. Consumers of media should also be literate and informed so that they can make informed choices about the consumption of media contents. This can be achieved through enlightenment programmes in the media and schools to educate media users on the proper use of the media. There is also a need to include ethics in the secondary school curriculum to train young people on ethics and the essence of man and to set the foundation for the moral conduct of persons in society. These persons will eventually become media users and media practitioners, so it is essential to make them not just moral beings but media literate. When this is done simultaneously with the enthronement of ethics in the media, contents by media organisations will be better appreciated.

11.0 Conclusion

The media, as an institution, is an extension of human society: human persons make up the media and drive media activities. Apart from doing no harm through what is published, aired or broadcasted, the media should be aware of its impact on the lives of its audience and make its content as humanly positive and uplifting as possible. Ethical and morally upright media will cultivate a conscious and knowledgeable audience/consumer group. Media social responsibility is key to cultivating an engaging and active audience. When the media perform their functions in a way that respects and upholds the dignity of the audience, media consumers will better understand themselves and the society they live in, and they will, in turn, appreciate the media more. This should be the ideal source of media popularity.

References

- Aristotle. (1999). *Nicomachean Ethics* (2 ed.). (T. Irwin, Trans.) Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc.
- Ball-Rockeach, S. J., & DeFleur, M. L. (1976, January). A Dependency Model of MassMedia Effects. *Communication Research*, 3(1), 3-21. doi:10.1177/009365027600300101
- Bardoel, J. L., & d'Haenens, L. (2004, March). Media responsibility and accountability: New conceptualizations and practices. *Communications*, 29(1), 5-25. doi:10.1515/comm.2004.007
- Boone, B. (2017). *Ethics 101: From altruism and utilitarianism to bioethics and political ethics, an exploration of the concepts of right and wrong*. Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media.
- Butts, J. B., & Rich, K. L. (2013). *Nursing Ethics: Across the Curriculum and into Practice*. Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Publishers.
- Flite, C. A., & Harman, L. B. (2013). Code of Ethics: Principles for ethical leadership. *Perspectives in Health Information Management, Winter*. Retrieved March 31, 2019, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3544144/>
- Geirsson, H., & Holmgren, M. R. (Eds.). (2000). *Ethical theory: A concise anthology*. New York: Broadview Press.
- Laswell, H. (1948). *The structure and function of communication and society: The communication of ideas*. New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies.
- McNaughton, D., & Rawling, P. (2006). "Deontology". In D. Copp (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (pp. 424-458). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (4 ed.). London: Sage.
- McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory*. Michigan: SAGE Publications.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (6 ed.). London: Sage.
- Okunna, C. S. (1995). *Ethics of Mass Communication*. Enugu: New Generation Books.
- Onikoyi, A., & Fadeyi, F. (2019, April 3). How Big Brother Naija contributes to the Nigerian economy. *Vanguard Newspapers*. Retrieved April 4, 2019, from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/04/how-big-brother-naija-contributes-to-the-nigerian-economy/>
- Pepple, I. I., & Acholonu, I. J. (2018). Media ethics as key to sound professionalism in Nigerian journalism practice. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 56-67. doi:10.17265/2160-6579/2018.02.002
- Schramm, W. (1964). *Mass media and national development*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press / UNESCO.
- Tseguy, S., & Asemah, E. S. (2014). An investigation of media practitioners' adherence to professional ethics in Minna, Nigeria. *Review of Communication and Media Studies*, 1, 10-21.
- Udeze, S. E. (2012). *Media law and ethics*. Enugu: Rhyce Kerex Ltd.
- Vorderer, P. (2001, November). It's all entertainment—sure. But what exactly is entertainment? Communication research, media psychology, and the explanation of entertainment experiences. *Poetics*, 29(4), 247-261. doi:10.1016/S0304-422X(01)00037-7
- Wright, C. R. (1960). Functional analysis and mass communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24(4), 605-620.