

The Role of Ethics in Combating Impunity and Promoting the Safety of Journalists, presented by SHU'AIBU USMAN LEMAN, NUJ National Secretary at a **WORKSHOP ON SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS** organized as part of activities marking the **WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY 2013** at the Rockview Hotel, Abuja, May 2, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is very often being criticized and hardly enjoys public confidence as a result of what the journalists do or fail to do. As we all know, every profession is usually guarded and guided by certain laws, rules and regulations-whether formally coded or only recognized as conventions. The professional must therefore maintain some decorum and keep to certain standards of integrity to earn trust and command respect in the performance of his chosen career.

Media houses all over the world are subject to pressures by special interest groups. Among these are public relations people who are employed by special interest groups to help them look good, not only in the news but also in-between the news. No media house can ever be sure that none of its staff engages in the distortion or omission of the truth. For some, the trouble even starts from the top where the owners or their managers pass policies designed to help one group or so against another down the line.

The idea of a journalistic ethos in this paper is not only to provoke discussion on ethical and moral issues in journalism practice, it is also intended to provide a philosophical basis for journalistic ethics and set conceptual framework for working at and appraising the many hazards in modern journalism practice.

To do this, the paper will look at the issue from the following perspective viz essence of code of ethics, ethics and journalism practice, accountability in media practice and quality conscience journalism and ethical challenges.

Safety implies freedom from danger and, in the news gathering context; safety implies protection from a range of threats journalists encounter, including arrest, legal action, imprisonment, kidnapping, intimidation, bombs, landmines, being shot in the cross-fire and murder, amongst others. Journalists are exposed to more danger in violent armed conflict than in peace and stable situations. The working conditions of journalists are in the most cases inadequate. Journalists working, as fulltime, and as freelancers, are overall poorly remunerated. They do not enjoy health and safety protection and rarely are covered by insurance. They are not even provided with the necessary equipment to help them protect themselves in conflicts or civilian unrests. Most media houses are not financially stable or strong, and those who have the financial capacity to take safety measures do not want to invest in the safety of journalists and many are not properly trained. All these are factors that encourage ethical violations and politicians and other stakeholders resort to self help in the absence of an industry regulator to check and apportion sanctions for some of these excesses of the media.

ESSENCE OF CODE OF ETHICS FOR JOURNALISTS

The code of ethics for Nigerian Journalists starts off with a preamble that enjoins all who would participate in the profession of journalism to abide by the professional and ethical standards cast forth in 14 categories.

In summary, this deals with Editorial Independence, Accuracy and Fairness, Privacy, of Privilege/Non-Disclosure, Decency, Discrimination, Reward and Gratification; Violence; Children and Minors; Access to Information; Social Responsibility; Plagiarism and Copyright.

Under these categories, the code prescribes the right attitudes towards the practice of journalism. It clearly sketches what ought to be done and what should not be done, against the background of establishing good conduct and morals within the rank and file of those engaged in the professional practice of journalism. In actual fact, it is very much in tune with the code of ethics of other international organizations. Like the International Federation of Journalists, etc whose credos deal on the right to truth, professional integrity, non-disclosure of confidential source of information, social responsibility, fairness and accuracy and respect for human dignity.

Even UNESCO has its own draft of an international ethics, which stresses accuracy, high standard of professional conduct, respect for people's reputation, truth and faithful reporting of all events by the journalists. The point is that the code of ethics for the Nigerian journalists is quite in line with what obtains else where in the world.

There is no doubt that the code of ethics for the Nigerian journalist captures all the elements the moral philosophers have enunciated in the various ethical philosophies of journalism. *According to Prof. Mike Egbon, "journalism ethics is sure a tacky issue that requires not only discussion but also a deliberation and careful differentiation to arrive at workable solutions"* (Egbon 2001:28).

According to Shramm *"When one looks at mass communication as a social institution, one cannot fail to notice the tremendous push and pull of public interest and tastes on the institution"* (Shramm 1982:37). Any attempt to appraise how journalists conform or fail to conform to ethical principles so far discussed must take, first into consideration the general malaise rampant in the larger society.

Journalism or journalists do not exist in isolation or operate in a vacuum, but a part and parcel of the environment, they are located. This means that journalism ethics used by journalists are invariably embedded not only in the content of the news itself but also in our values, philosophies, our interest and perspective. It is appropriate therefore at this juncture to look at root of Africa especially Nigeria's

debased morals of corruption, poverty and bad governance, in order to have some understanding at the unethical practices of journalism, and to enable us to understand why quality conscience journalists are hard to come by these days and the way out in the future.

ETHICS AND JOURNALISM PRACTICE

According to Merrill (1982:8) *“ethics has to do with duty-duty to self and duty to others. It is considered primarily individual or personal even when it relates to obligation and duties to other”*. Merrill contends that the duality of individuals and social morality is implicit in the very concept of ethics. He adds that what the journalist communicates is in a very real way what he himself is. If a journalist is amoral, then there will be no need talking about ethics.

This thought makes ethics a very important concern to the journalist who must imbibe some standard by which he can judge, good or bad, responsible or irresponsible and this, of course, indicates an attitude which embraces not only freedom but also personal responsibility in the same vein. Ethical consideration is very important as it compels the journalist to commitment and thoughtful decisions when faced with alternatives that could lead to the highest good of enhancing his credibility as a person and journalist.

Journalism as a noble profession has been eulogized as the “fourth estate of the realm,” “The Watch Dog”, etc. *“It is a profession like no other one else. Journalism is beautiful, exciting and also challenging as it is froth with many hazards”*. (Egbon 2001:20) It possesses the potential powers to influence not only the individual but the society as a whole. And this influence can be for political, socio-cultural and economic good or bad health of the nation. By logical progression this could extend to global issues and action of great concern and magnitude. It is incumbent on members of this profession to provide truthful, fair and comprehensive account of events and issues to the citizenry, as such enlightenment is a precursor of justice and foundation of democratic governance.

In the words of **Hilda Mufurusta**, *“the media is viewed as a distinct profession of great social importance exercising special powers that require special regulations and checks. At the same time, to handle questions of ethics in the journalism profession must be a matter of personal integrity for the individual media practitioner with or without recourse to a written code’*.

According to **Barney**, *“A journalist must decide early in moment of consideration, introspection and from a background of a relatively great amount of knowledge what his philosophical and ethical stance will be toward the society he will find himself serving. That the society is an increasing pluralistic one, places more pressure upon him and will understandably contribute to his confusion and perhaps indecision.* (Barney 1982:321).

ACCOUNTABILITY IN MEDIA PRACTICE

Any discussion of media accountability cannot be complete without first looking at the social responsibility theory of the media. This theory is more found in Europe and countries under European influence. It is a modified version of free press theory and emphasizes more the accountability of media (especially broadcasting) to society. Media are free but should accept obligations to serve the public good.

In the constitutional sense, accountability is the quality of being accountable, answerable, bound to give explanation on an issue into which any one has been associated. What the constitution meant by this provision is that the press should be in a position to lubricate the act of government and the media should be given some protection to carry out this tasking role. This is logical because judges enjoy some protection through a provision which isolates judges from being sued for libel for whatever they say in their court. Likewise the parliament for whatever they say in the house.

Hence freedom of press in Nigeria should be made a right and not a privilege. In the same vein the media should give the people a run-down of government constitutional obligations to the people and make the leaders to be accountable. Unfortunately, the press have been found wanting in fulfilling this statutory obligation due to some challenges which these practitioners face in discharging their routine functions.

These challenges are now considered in line with quality conscience journalism.

QUALITY CONSCIENCE JOURNALISM AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES.

A serious problem for the concept of quality conscience journalism is posed by the environment within which the practicing journalist operates. **Prince Tony Momoh** captures this bleak and frustrating atmosphere in his paper; “*Thought on Curricular Design for Media Laws, Ethics and Regulations*” thus: “*How can we as media practitioners operate in a polity where everyone breaks the rule, where the journalists are poorly paid or not paid at all, where record keeping is so defective that people can pay their way out of crimes, where the officials who are supposed to give information hoard it; where there is total loyalty to the family and the ethnic group and ritual protection for their misdeeds; where those who should serve enslave the people through robbing the treasury?*”.

Okunna in her book titled *Ethics of Mass Communication* said that “*Nigerian society is filled with all sorts of ethical maladies that have defied all cures over the years*”. She attributes the major cause directly or indirectly to the all encompassing problem of materialism. She contends that “*Nigeria’s materialistic tendency has now redefined social morality and makes it the measure for determining the individual,*

irrespective of how the ill-gotten wealth may have come through glaring immoral sources (Okunna 2003:81-82). Under this umbrella of materialism she itemized bribery and corruption, “kick back” ten percent, kola settlement and perhaps I should add *chua chua*, [local parlance for shoddy deals], *Egunje*, {bribe} etc.

Other ethical problems that mortgage the journalists’ conscience are corruption, poor salary, beat associations, public relations people/advertising agencies, editorial interferences, junketing; these are obstacles to quality conscience journalism. Our attention here will be focused on some specific practices that militate against the journalists in their attempt to be loyal to the journalism ethics they had promised or sworn to uphold.

CORRUPTION

We rank corruption in the first place because it is the mother of all the other vices like poverty, greed and avarice, fraud and all others.

Let’s look at poverty from an angle that rest the blame on the real culprit, the Media Owners (Proprietors).

These days, many of the news media proprietors establish their media outfits to propagate themselves and boost their egos in accordance with what they intend to reap from the unsuspecting public. Be that as it may, the real problem comes in the way they treat their journalists. The pay is poor, there is no gain saying that, but even some of these journalists are owed the meager allowance up to several months.

Besides, some do not even have a fixed amount of salary they are entitled to at the end of the month. They are contracted and sent to many bureaus in each state to file in stories to their headquarters. This practice leads to some of the journalists sitting in their rooms to coin and concoct non existent stories to be filed to their masters at the headquarters. You can agree that by such practice ethics is thrown to the winds. What now is the justification for the injunction of the code of ethics, which orders the journalists to respect **ACCURACY** and **FAIRNESS** in reporting? It will not be out of place to say that poverty is the major reason for many other vices by journalists. It forces them to negotiate and doctor facts in order to keep body and soul together ultimately producing dead conscience journalists.

ADVERTISING AGENCIES/PUBLIC RELATIONS

The biggest source of money for the free press anywhere in the world is advertising revenue. Even in situations where government subsidy is given, advertising revenues can go a long way and whoever controls advertising (i.e agencies) most often command a lot of power over the media.

In fact, it has been shown that pressure on the editorial content of the newspaper is most effective when it is brought to bear through the newspaper's own advertising department.

There is a sense in which we can argue that corruption has been deliberately fostered on the media by those who seek to control the flow of information. This means that whereas in the past, government officials and corporate organizations in particular sought to control the media through coercion, including threat of withdrawal of advertisement patronage, these days, the trend is to seek to corrupt journalists through the spread of tradition of gratification. This has become pivotal to the spread of corruption in the media.

In particular, public relations practitioners have perfected the art of ensuring that they get the best coverage possible in the media. They organize press conferences on behalf of their clients, and would routinely distribute "brown envelopes" to journalists whether or not they demanded for it. It so happens that these days many journalists actually demand for the brown envelopes. According to **Azubuike Ishiekwene**, the then Editor Punch Newspaper and now Group Managing Director of *Leadership*, in a workshop organized by The Nigerian Press Council (NPC), "*PR men have also learned to follow up on stories concerning their clients through the process of monitoring the newsroom to ensure that the desired stories are published with favourable slant. They have developed strategies for cultivating editors in newsrooms, to whom they sometimes, send advance 'packages' totally unsolicited. They also encourage the fixing of prices for stories and photographs appearing on prime pages in Newspapers and Magazines or as headline news on Radio or Television. But the money they pay does not go to the media organizations, most of whom are sinking deeper into economic depression, but to individual editors and reporters. In a sense, this is a logical next step to the advert of paid for news which debuted on Television and Radio some years ago and which has now been institutionalized in both private and public electronic media*".

BEAT ASSOCIATIONS

The situation has been exacerbated by the recent upsurge in the number of beat associations in the media. This too began at the behest of public relations personnel in parastatals and big companies. They had faced difficulties in dealing with so many journalists individually and thought it was better to organize the reporters into associations. In the face of it, the objective could be noble. But soon, it became clear that it has developed into an avenue for handing out unsubstantiated information to reporters or better still, skillfully filtered information to the beat reporter for onward transmission to the general public. It is a refined form of a policy of systematic deception of the public. Surprisingly, the only people who did not see the danger in this are the journalists.

The impact of this on the media is devastating. Journalists in these groups no longer see any reason why they should pursue exclusive stories and scoops which were the hallmarks of a good professional in the old days. In fact, fully written stories are syndicated by beat association members to even their colleagues who were absent from public events. Expectedly, the stories are written in the same drab and uninspiring manner. By this singular measure, it becomes very easy to control not just one newspaper, but most the media.

Overtime, Beat Associations have gained in confidence, they dictate their terms, they set their prices. According to **Azubuikwe Ishiekwene**, *“once the Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria was blacked out by all the media in Lagos because his public relations people did not pay the fee demanded by airport correspondents. The reporters had all attended the press conference at the airport by the archbishop who was returning to the city. He made very important comments on the event of the day. Ordinarily, his story would have made the front page of the next day’s papers and as major highlights in the broadcast media. But not one newspaper published the story or Archbishop’s photograph the next day. Neither did the story make it into the news bulletins of any radio and television station”*.

EDITORIAL INTERFERENCE

Proprietors and some government officials create stories around themselves to look good in the eyes of the public and the media simply publish the surrogate information. It is proven that there are newspapers whose editorial columns may be bought and delivered to special interest. According to **Garba Shehu**, one time President of the Nigerian Guild of Editors, in a paper titled ***Corruption in the Media***, *two newspapers operating from the same city published an editorial on the same issue within 24 hours of each other. The issue was the survival of a government agency whose continued existence was at stake”*.

The ethical question raised was how two newspapers could run editorial endorsing not only the same position but having the incredible coincidence of identity of opinion and in a few places phrasing and words. Could those editorials have been *canned*? Where is the place of **EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE**?

JUNKETING FACTORS

Junketing is widely viewed as a threat to objectivity. Junkets are trips by reporters whose travel and other expenses are paid by the news sources, not his/her own medium. The sources normally stage events as an excuse but the real motive has always been to maintain good relations with journalists as well as to generate some publicity in the process.

All expenses paid trips are very common carrots in the travel and entertainment industry. It is no secret that airlines providing junkets expect in return, a good number of favourable stories. This practice also happens in politics where the persuader is in a position to offer money to a journalist. This is by no means an exhaustive catalogue of ways in which the ethics of journalism may be compromised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We cannot forever keep talking about the ills and unethical practice of journalism without charting a way forward to lead us out of this unethical jungle.

After lambasting the shoddy way many journalists handle this noble fraternity of the pen today, in a workshop in 2000, a veteran journalist, **Chief Ray Ekpo**, the then Chief Executive of the *Newswatch* and then President of the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) asked a seemingly simple question but a very important and all-encompassing question. *“What can we do about improving our practice, about regulating it so that we can earn respect as professionals”?*

In answering this question, every journalist who comes into this business should do so armed with a morale ethical shield, source of this basic belief or view is from home, school, and religious authority.

It is very important for a journalist to know that these moral and ethical belief systems will come under attack more from persuaders (interest groups). The journalist must come to terms with what he or she can do and what he or she cannot do for interest groups. He or she must watch for these pressures, from family members, as the persuader may even be a friend privately offering gratification, advice, praise and rewards. Such onslaughts will greatly chip away at the ethical sensitivities by explaining why they are permissible.

Each media house must define its mission and pursue it with visionary zeal. It must at all times seek to stand by such principles and rigorously enforce them on their staff. On the other hand, media houses must fulfill their obligation to employees by paying reasonably competitive wages as and when due. By so doing, the respective media organizations will find it easier to enforce discipline and the prescribed standards.

But nothing is perhaps more important than a good pay to keep the report on the ethical path. One time president of the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria, **Late Chief M.K.O. Abiola** used to say all the time that *“if you do not pay your journalists well, someone else will pay them and they will work for him”*. Barney also contended that the *“newspaper owners who pay pittance as salary to his staff has no right to demand of them the correct moral and ethical conduct”* (Barney 1982:301). In Nigeria today not

only are the journalists or media workers poorly paid, they sometimes spend between six to twelve months without getting any pay at all. Publishers who are conscious of the need to report news fairly and objectively have been taking various measures to ensure unethical conducts are banished from newsroom.

The issue of good educational background has for a long time been perceived to be central to good journalistic ethics among reporters. Education is the greatest provider of socio-economic security. It then follows that the more education he or she has the more considerate and secured the reporter is likely to feel.

Outside this country, unethical practice is a firing offence in many media houses; we should at least borrow a leaf from these to better our own practice.

It is also necessary for the Nigeria Union of Journalists and other groups in the media to engage in deep introspection with a view to restructuring their modus operandi, and insist on strict observation of professional ethics and demonstrable acts of integrity. Deviant practice must be summarily punished while exceptional acts of professional judgment must be rewarded.

The Nigerian Press Council should also be re enforced and well funded to make it more formidable in enforcing standards and integrity in the media. Fighting impediments to good ethical journalism practice may be a long-drawn battle but with concerted efforts from stakeholders, the task is not insurmountable.

Conclusion

Journalism is like no other job, and must be guarded jealously. What journalists write and how they write it inevitably touch on the lives of other people. Careless or deliberate or mischievous publications can ruin many lives and properties as has been witnessed in our present day journalism. These self-centered egoistic journalists can also by slavish adulation, create or make celebrities out of crooks in our midst, thereby perpetuating the poverty, indiscipline and underdevelopment of our nation.

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