

## Nigerian Media Practitioners and Ethical Values: Media Audience Assessment

Aderogba Adeyemi

Department of Languages and Linguistics,  
College of Humanities and Culture,  
Osun State University.

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### Abstract

The mass media industry can be likened to manufacturing outfits; the only difference is in the product. Media product is news and information and its consumer is the media audience. Media industry will flourish to the extent of public trust in the quality of its product. Media industry should therefore do everything within its power to put in place trust building mechanism. Maintenance of ethical values and standards are found to be so effective in winning audience trust. It is therefore of significant importance to focus research attention on media ethics with the belief that by so doing all the stakeholders in the media industry would strengthen the struggle against unethical behaviour in media profession. This study examined audience assessment of the level of journalists' compliance with profession's code of ethics in disseminating value-laden news and information. The survey method was adopted and three out of the six states in the western Nigeria were randomly selected for the study. It was discovered that overwhelming majority of the sampled population thought that news and information disseminated by the media was credible and reliable and that activities of the journalists were guided by journalists' professional code of ethics. However, majority of the audience covered by the study were also of the opinion that journalists are largely corrupt as they freely accept bribes and other forms of gratification and that most media outfits lacked editorial independence. It can therefore be deduced that there exist in Nigerian media industry serious ethical problem. There is therefore an urgent need to address the problem. All the stakeholders in the media profession need to come together to address the problem of unethical behaviour in the media.

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**Keywords:** codes of ethics, journalism ethics, unethical practices, media audience, news and information, news integrity, ethical behaviour.

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### INTRODUCTION

The only product that media industry offers for sale is news and information and so the quality of news items not only in terms of accuracy, brevity, consistency, coherency etc., but also but also in terms of ethical consideration is of paramount importance to the survival of the industry. Trust is the name of the game. Once news subscribers lose their trust in a media outfit such an outfit can easily go under. Audience would only patronize them and keep them afloat if they are sure that news and information emanating from the media outfits is such that could be trusted. That is why the integrity of the news gatherers and that of the news sources is of utmost importance. Integrity is an ethical consideration. In ethics, "integrity is regarded as the honesty and truthfulness or accuracy of one's actions. Integrity is a concept of consistency of actions, values, methods, measures, principles, expectations, and outcomes", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Integrity>. Integrity in the journalism profession can only be achieved when media ethics are entrenched in the profession by media practitioners.

Foreman (2010:17) defines ethics as a set of moral principles, a code—often unwritten—that guides a

person's conduct. Ethical issues in journalism are quite complex as they affect several aspects of the profession—from numerous journalistic virtues such as accuracy of news items (the use of new technology to alter photographs also bothers on accuracy (Iggers 1999)), accountability, objectivity, truthfulness, conflict of interest, racism, sexism, privacy etc.,—to response of different media outfits to economic challenges. For example, media outfits could lie about their circulation figures in order to gain the patronage of advertisers (Foreman 2010, Iggers 1999).

Discourse on journalistic ethics is not new in the profession and is not peculiar to Nigeria. Advanced countries were the first to develop strong code of conduct, first in most elite professions and then in journalism. Media researchers believe that ethical issues could manifest in a variety of ways and cut across all facets of human endeavour and most elite professions such as law, medicine, engineering, accounting, etc. tackle the menace of unethical practices in various ways. Most of these professions have well-structured code of conduct. (Adeyemi and Okorie 2010, Igboanusi 2006).

The journalism profession is not lagging behind most especially in the practice of setting acceptable standards known as code of conduct, but strict adherence to such code of conduct by media practitioners is another issue entirely.

### **Ethical Problems in the Mass Media**

Ethics evolved with society. Without ethics decency will vanish. All manners of indecent behaviour in our society must be abhorred. Corruption and numerous other ethical problems in the mass media are a cause for serious concern by all. This is because without concerted efforts, the profession of journalism is in jeopardy. No doubt, unethical behaviour can quickly damage the reputation of journalists and the integrity of media outfits.

Unethical behaviour in the mass media is quite numerous. Few of such acts are hereby examined.

### **Deception**

Deception is one of numerous unethical practices in the media and it is perhaps one of the most controversial as some presumed ethical media practitioners sometimes argue that the method could be employed to elicit information in difficult terrains. Deception is multidimensional. It includes fabrication in all its ramifications. Undercover reporting technique which is a "tradition in newspaper investigative reporting through the 1970's" (Foreman, 2010:293) is one of the deceptive techniques.

In fact, some media scholars believe that deception could be necessary evil (see, e.g., Rieran, 1997; Lambeth, 1992 as cited in Wilkins and Coleman (2005: 92)). This is probably because journalistic deception could help in uncovering hidden facts in order to uphold the right of public to know.

This method has been in used by journalists centuries ago. According to Wilkins and Coleman (2005), deceptive practices by journalists are not uncommon, as seen in 18<sup>th</sup> century impersonations by muckrakers, and in more recent cases of hidden cameras and fabrication. In fact, Bok (1978/1989), (cited in Wilkins and Coleman, 2005), opines that deception is often referred to as "telling lies in public good", citing the Watergate scandal as an example even as he emphasizes that "Trust in some degree of veracity is the foundation of relations among humans; when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse.". This seems to be also the final position of Wilkins and Coleman (2005) on the matter: "although such practices stem from an altruistic desire to advance public good, when carried out without thoroughgoing reflection, they do serious damage to the profession's standards and public image" Wilkins and Coleman (2005:94)

To these scholars and indeed numerous other scholars who are deontologists, that usually consider the action rather than the consequences of the action, there is no justification whatsoever, for any form of deception because of the danger it poses to journalism profession. They are convinced that deception has the capacity to destroy audience trust and confidence in mass media. But there also exist in the media profession the teleologists that consider the consequences rather than action. To them, deception that is carried out for "noble end" is right. They believe that "the end can justify the means" (see, e.g., Michael Josephson cited in Foreman (2010:77)). Even though ethical considerations should be foremost in the wise journalist's mind in the decision making process, journalists should nevertheless try to strike a balance in all of this. Journalists could adopt Aristotle's Golden Mean, "the virtue of moderation – finding the mean, intermediate, between an excess and a deficiency" (Foreman 2010:79).

### **Ethics of Sleaze Coverage**

This has to do with coverage of scandals and all forms of sensationalism. This was particularly rampant in the USA and the UK in the 90's. Journalists engaged in reckless pursuit of scandalous news stories through evasion of privacy, bugging, surveillance and subterfuge. In this regard, Keeble (2009:129-130) points out,

The *Independent on Sunday* (23 July 1995) claimed that between 1990 and 1995 there were 34 Conservative, one Liberal Democrat and four Labour scandals; of these around a quarter involved sex... many lost their reputations, some their jobs (and Princess Diana her life).

Former US President, Bill Clinton's affair with the White House intern, Monica Lewinsky also dominated media headlines around the world about that time. Keeble (2009:131) attributes the problem to prevailing economic pressure in the media industry at the time and the effects of the end of cold war on the development of the industry:

The explosion of sleaze journalism was also a product of the hyper competition on Fleet Street. In the face of falling sales and the need for rising profits, the focus on sensationalism became inevitable.

American media had its own fair share of the pressure (Iggers 1999).

### **Distortion of Truth**

That journalists are known to tell outright lies is no longer news, what is not known to many people is the level of distortion of truth that exists in the profession. Journalists have been accused in the past of

presenting fiction as reality; they steal words of others, they put “words into people’s mouths”. Sometimes journalists chose to not report facts or to out rightly not give an event media coverage. Goldstein (2007:30-31) drives this point home by pointing to how some of the leading American tort scholars—William Haltom, Michael McCann and Nancy Marder have viewed the development. He writes:

These scholars hand up serious indictments of how the press misrepresents the world. By its nature, the news targets the unusual: when a man bites a dog, not when a dog bites a man. This premise is too often left unexamined... they focus on the aberrational shows how journalism can distort reality.

Media audience may never get to know all the truth about events but society deserves the right to know the truth and nothing but the truth. The fourth estate in the realm will be failing in its watch dog role if it shields away the truth from society it is called to serve.

#### **Privacy**

Privacy has been variously defined by scholars. “It is the ability of an individual or group to seclude themselves or information about themselves and thereby reveal themselves selectively”. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Privacy>) Loius W. Hodges (cited in Foreman, 2010:231) defines privacy as “the power to determine who may gain access to information about oneself.”

Right to privacy should be an integral part of human rights. This right is recognized by the laws and even constitutions of some countries. The importance of right of individual to be ‘let alone’ cannot be over-emphasized. Every individual has right to privacy. Hodges believes that “privacy plays a central role in human affairs. Without some degree of privacy, civilized life would not be possible” Loius W. Hodges (cited in Foreman, 2010:231)

Privacy is a right that needs to be respected by all and sundry. Invasion of privacy by men of the pen profession is considered unethical and journalists should therefore be conscious of it.

Anthony Lewis of *Columbia University* cited in (LaMay 2003: 64) writes, “What I am suggesting is that a piece of journalism prying into someone’s private life may not give the victim a right to damages, but it may be indecent nonetheless. It may violate the standards that we as journalists ought to have”

#### **Other Types of Unethical Conduct**

The following misconducts were added by Aina (2004) and Okunna (2003) sensationalism, fakery, plagiarism, moonlighting, corruption, junkets, cheque book journalism, sycophancy, character assassination, pressure (internal and external), abuse of confidential sources, Afghanistanism, bribery, sexism, problems of inaccuracy, lack of objectivity and fairness, denying a second party a right of reply among others.

#### **Origin of the Problem**

As stated earlier, ethics evolved with society but journalistic ethics is a relatively new concept. It is a 20<sup>th</sup> century creation. Journalistic ethics was born as a reaction to excesses of libertarian (or free) press. This was properly captured by Siebert et al (1963) in their book titled *Libertarian Theory of the Press* which is popularly referred to as “Free Press Theory”. The theory according to (McQuail, 1987:37) advocated the idea that the press should be free of censorship. Journalists soon began to abuse this freedom by engaging in all sorts of unethical practices. These abuses were endured in the liberal societies up till the second half of the twentieth century when mass media researchers began to take a second look at the situation. They advocated for free but responsible press, this was what gave rise to the social responsibility theory of the press. It was believed that the mass media played such a pivotal role in the society that they should not be allowed to operate without focus and without a sense of responsibility and that mass media that have unlimited freedom could easily brew anarchy and wreak havoc. Professional associations in countries around the world responded to this call by formulating code of ethics that could serve as a form of check against the excesses of journalists.

#### **Code of Conduct of Journalism**

Iggers (1999:35) affirms that; “the fundamental principles expressed in journalism’s code of ethics are supposed to provide the basis for ethical decision-making”. Most journalism organizations in countries around the world have subscribed to code of conduct of professional journalists because they believe such code would help improve the performance of media practitioners. But sometimes many of the media organizations are somewhat reluctant to tackle the problem headlong by implementing some aspects of this code like their counterparts in other elite professions.

Nigerian journalists joined their colleagues in the western countries by formulating code of ethics. This was first done in 70s only to be replaced in 1998 when the Nigerian Press Organization (comprising the Nigerian Guild of Editors, and the Newspaper Proprietors’ Association of Nigeria) drew up a new code of ethics. The code of ethics for professional

journalists was put in place primarily to help uphold journalism ethics and standards. Code of ethics are meant to be the companion of all practising journalists because they provide the needed benchmark to enable media practitioners excel in the practice of journalism as they present the practitioners the ethical guidelines for determining what constitutes news and by which they can also be judged.

Unfortunately, despite the existence of a code of ethics for the journalism profession in Nigeria, there is that belief in many quarters that the majority of journalists are not living in accordance with the standards set for the profession.

### **THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Some media practitioners are of the opinion that code of ethics of journalism cannot be adhered to in its entirety because they believe that some aspects of the code are utopian. The audience assessment of the level of credibility as well as reliability accorded news and information emanating from the Nigerian media organizations is therefore of serious interest. This is crucial because both the Nigerian society and media outfits are considered corrupt.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study is therefore set to pursue the following objectives:

- ❖ To determine the level of credibility and reliability south-west media audience accords news and information emanating from the region's mass media.
- ❖ To determine media audience perception of government influence on journalists' news judgment, if any.
- ❖ To determine if Nigerian journalists use abusive or vulgar words.
- ❖ To investigate the level of compliance of journalists with the profession's code of ethics.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- ❖ What is the level of credibility and reliability accorded news and information emanating from the South-West by the region's media audience?
- ❖ Does the government in any way influence journalists' news judgment?
- ❖ Do the Nigerian journalists make use of abusive or vulgar words?
- ❖ How compliant are the journalists to the profession's code of ethics?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The most appropriate theories for this study seem to be the Deontological Theory of Ethics and Social Responsibility Theory since the study focuses on how

journalists can best fulfil their professional obligations to society.

### **Deontological Theory of Ethics**

The philosophy of this theory focuses on the actions rather than the consequences. The actions are considered from the point view of whether they are morally right or wrong. Deon implies what ought to be done. Deontologists have a firm belief that actions that are considered right are those that are based on the good intention of the person involved without much ado, the consequences of such actions notwithstanding.

The Deontological Theory as philosophical concept originated in a book *Five Types of Ethical Theory* published in 1930 and authored by Charlie Dunbar Broad (1887 – 1971). The theory is usually referred to as a duty or obligation-based theory. Even though protagonists of this theory are of several schools of thought. The group considered here is referred to as moral absolutists which upholds the belief that whatever is wrong is wrong no matter the angle from which we look at it and regardless of the consequences of such an action. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, for instance, argued that it is always wrong to lie regardless of what necessitates the action. Deontologists believe that people are duty bound to act in a morally right manner. They must act out of respect for law and order and not just because of the consequences of their actions (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/>). Whatever the variation of Deontological Theory of ethics may be, one factor that unifies them all is the view that wrong doing should be abhorred. Actions that are considered inimical to the code of ethics of the journalism profession are totally wrong and should be resisted by journalists.

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

Social Responsibility Theory is considered relevant because of the underlying principles of the theory as identified by McQuail (1993:117). According to the scholar, the media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society. These obligations can only be met by setting high standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.

In accepting and carrying out these obligations, the media should be self-regulating within the framework of the law and established institution.

Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to the society as well as to their employers and the market. An accountable media practitioner would be truthful, accurate, and objective as well as balanced (Adeyemi 2013:125-126).

**Research Design**

The survey method was adopted for this study. The mass media audience of the south-west geo-political zone formed the population for the study. The six states in the zone formed the universe, out of which three—Oyo, Ogun and Lagos—were randomly selected. The sampled population was further narrowed to the capital cities of the three states selected: Ikeja for Lagos State, Abeokuta for Ogun State and Ibadan for Oyo State.

The questionnaire was adopted as research instrument for the study and it contained 14 well-structured questions grouped in three different sections. A total of 1000 copies of questionnaire were administered, out of which 918 were retrieved. This represented a high response rate of 91.8 percent and mortality rate of 8.2 percent. Three research assistants were hired to administer the questionnaire on a stratified sample of the population. The following areas of the cities were targeted: banks, commercial areas, market places, public institutions, motor parks and some selected residential areas.

**DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

Table 1: Respondents’ access to mass media

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	761	82.9
No	109	11.9
sometimes	48	5.2
Total	918	100.0

According to table 1, overwhelming majority of those sampled, that is 82.9 percent had access to mass media, while 11.9 percent said they had no access to mass media and 5.2 percent said they sometimes had access to mass media channels.

Table 2: Types of media accessed by respondents

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Radio	506	55.1
TV	210	22.9
Print Media	64	7.0
Non-conventional communication channel	107	11.7
Internet	31	3.4
Total	918	100.0

Table 2 shows that majority of those sampled, that is 55.1 had access to Radio, 22.9 percent to TV, 7 percent to Print Media, 11.7 percent accessed non-Conventional channels of communication and only 3.4 percent accessed the Internet.

Table 3: Opinion of respondents on credibility and reliability of news stories disseminated by Nigerian organizations

	Frequency	Valid Percent
very reliable	150	16.3
Reliable	532	58.0
not reliable	109	11.9
I cannot say	127	13.8
Total	918	100.0

Table 3 shows information on credibility and reliability of news story in Nigerian media. Majority of those sampled, that is 74.3 percent, were of the opinion that news and information in Nigerian mass media was reliable, 11.9 percent believed that news and information in Nigerian mass media was not reliable, while 13.8 percent were undecided.

Table 4: Respondents that believed that the activities of Nigerian journalists are guided by their professional code of ethics

	Frequency	Valid Percent
strongly agree	149	16.2
Agree	450	49.0
undecided	155	16.9
Disagree	72	7.8
strongly disagree	92	10.0
Total	918	100.0

Table 4 shows that 65.2 percent of those sampled believed that activities of Nigerian journalists were guided by the code of ethics of journalism profession, 16.9 percent were undecided, while 17.8 percent disagreed.

Table 5: Respondents that believed that Nigerian journalists are free of government influence

	Frequency	Valid Percent
strongly agree	15	1.6
Agree	276	30.1
Undecided	165	18.0
Disagree	417	45.4
strongly disagree	45	4.9
Total	918	100.0

Table 5 shows the statistics on the independence of Nigerian journalists vis-à-vis government influence. 31.7 agreed that Nigerian journalists were independent of government influence. However, majority of those sampled, that is 50.3 believed that they were not independent while 18 percent were undecided.

Table 6: Respondents that believed that Nigerian journalists do not accept bribes and gratifications

	Frequency	Valid Percent
strongly agree	30	3.3
Agree	96	10.5
Undecided	285	31.0
Disagree	312	34.0
Strongly disagree	195	21.2
Total	918	100.0

Table 6 shows that as much as 55.2 percent of the sampled population were of the opinion that Nigerian journalists accept bribes and other gratifications, while 13.8 percent disagreed and 31 percent were undecided.

Table 7: Respondents that agreed that Nigerian journalists do not use abusive and vulgar language

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Strongly agree	210	22.9
Agree	396	43.1
Undecided	184	20.0
Disagree	113	12.3
Strongly disagree	15	1.6
Total	918	100.0

Table 7 shows that 66 percent of the population believed that Nigerian journalists do not use vulgar and abusive language, while 13.9 percent did not agree and 20 percent were undecided.

Table 8: Respondents that were of the opinion that Nigerian journalists do not discriminate

	Frequency	Valid Percent
strongly agree	180	19.6
Agree	352	38.3
undecided	266	29.0
Disagree	90	9.8
strongly disagree	30	3.3
Total	918	100.0

According to table 8, as much as 57.9 percent of the sampled mass media audience believed that Nigerian journalists do not discriminate against ethnic minorities, 13.3 percent disagreed and 29 percent were undecided.

**DISCUSSION**

The data show there are serious concerns about the compliance of the Nigerian journalists with their profession’s code of ethics. Even though Nigerian media audience still found news and information provided by Nigerian media reliable and credible, certain revelations of the study are of serious concern. For example, 55.2 percent of the media

audience believed that Nigerian journalists were corrupt. An earlier work on corruption in the media (Adeyemi and Okorie 2010: 192) had found that 75.5 percent of the journalists received bribe monies tagged “brown envelop”. Majority of journalists enjoyed bribes and most media organizations do not frown at the practice either (Adeyemi 2013). We examined below our findings relative to each of our research questions.

**Research Question 1**

What is the level of credibility and reliability accorded news and information emanating from the South-West media organizations by the region’s media audience?

The overwhelming majority of those sampled, 74.3 percent, according to Table 3, were of the opinion that news and information in Nigerian mass media were credible and reliable. A high percentage of the audience in the region, ( 65.2 percent) as shown in Table 4, believed that the activities of journalists were guided by the code of ethics of the journalism profession. These findings suggest that even though Nigerian journalists are believed to be corrupt the level of such corruption has not affected audience assessment of the media’s credibility and reliability.

**Research Question 2**

**Does government in any way influence journalists’ news judgment?**

Majority of the audience in the South-West were of the opinion that government has tremendous influence on the news and information disseminated by the media. According to statistics in Table 5, 50.3 percent believed that journalists were not independent and that Nigerian media did not enjoy editorial independence.

**Research Question 3**

**Do Nigerian journalists use abusive or vulgar words?**

Quite a number of respondents, according to Table 7, 57.9 percent believed that Nigerian journalists do not use vulgar or abusive words, 13.9 percent of those sampled believed that Nigerian journalists use vulgar or abusive words while 20 percent were undecided.

**Question 4.**

**How compliant are the journalists to the profession’s code of ethics?**

Although majority of the sampled population, that is 55.2 percent believed that Nigerian journalists accept bribes and other forms gratification, quite a reasonable number of the media audience, that is 65.2 percent were of the opinion that activities of journalists in the region were guided by code of ethics of journalism profession (see Tables 4 and 6).

As much as 57.9 percent of the sampled media audience, according to Table 8 believed that journalists in the region do not discriminate against ethnic minority. This represents a relatively high level of compliance.

### CONCLUSION

Nigerian journalists, media organizations as well as other stakeholders still have a lot to do to preserve the integrity of journalism as a profession. The growth of media industry largely depends on audience trust. The society is undoubtedly the mirror with which the profession can see itself. So far, Nigerian media audience still has a measure of trust in the mass media if the findings of this study are anything to go by because the majority of people sampled in this study were of the opinion that Nigerian journalists were quite ethical in their behaviour, that their activities were guided by the profession's code of ethics, that news and information disseminated by the media were reliable and credible, and that journalists do not discriminate against ethnic minority. This positive assessment notwithstanding, Nigerian mass media cannot be given clean bill of health as the study revealed that journalists were corrupt and that the government had tremendous influence on the news and information they disseminate.

What the audience is saying is that all is not that well with the mass media. In fact, audience confidence in mass media is today at an all-time low, though this level of distrust in mass media is not peculiar to Nigeria. American news audience "has serious misgivings about journalists" (Wilkins and Coleman (2005)).

Iggers (1999:35) confirms that there is indeed a serious problem of loss of confidence between the audience and journalists and by extension, media organizations. He notes that "... in times of rapid change, in which journalism is facing both structural changes that threaten its integrity as a social practice and a public that is increasingly dissatisfied with journalism's performance, this traditional institutional ethical discourse becomes not simply irrelevant...". This is probably an objective assessment of American mass media by American media critics and the assessment is quite relevant to Nigerian situation.

Nigerian media organizations are not yet as dynamic as American news media and Nigerian media audience are not yet as sophisticated as that of America, hence the relative favourable audience perception of the Nigerian mass media organizations in the area of credibility and reliability of news and information. Extent to which Nigerian media practitioners are able to address various ethical challenges faced by the profession will determine whether or not Nigerian media organizations would

be able to sustain as well as improve on the level of audience trust the mass media enjoy presently.

The perception on Nigerian media organizations regarding corruption as well as editorial independence is quite negative and if it persists, it has the capacity to further damage the reputation of journalists and integrity of news and information being disseminated by the mass media organizations.

### LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study covered one out of six geo-political zones in Nigeria. Though the region covered by the study is regarded as the hub of Nigerian media industry because of the huge number of media outfits operating from the zone, the view expressed in the study may not be easily generalized in other part of the country.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ There is dire need for all the stakeholders to come together to address the problem of unethical behaviours of journalists, this will help in maintaining the integrity of the news flow.
- ❖ Media organizations should improve on the welfare package of journalists on their pay roll in order to curb incidence of corruption.
- ❖ Nigerian Union of Journalists and all other stakeholders in media industry should put in place proper monitoring mechanisms to check the activities of unethical journalists.
- ❖ Media industry owners should strengthen the independence of the media and prevent undue influence from the government.

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