Journalism Ethics: A Content Analysis on Acknowledgement of Stories in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

This study content analyzed how Nigerian newspapers adhere to one of the basic ethics of journalism in reporting happenings in the country, acknowledgement of sources of stories that the newspapers published. In 2013, Premium Times, an online Nigerian newspaper, published an article accusing many newspapers in the country of ethical flaws over a story the online newspaper broke of a letter written by former President Olusegun Obasanjo to the then President Goodluck Jonathan. The online newspaper said that majority of the newspapers published the complete texts of the letter which it first revealed to the world via its website without acknowledging it as the original source of the story. A decade after the indictment, this study uses rule-based thinking theory and quantitative content analysis to analyze stories in Daily Trust, Punch, The Nation and Vanguard newspapers to find the extent to which they respect the basic ethical requirements of the journalism profession. Findings from the study show that the newspapers still publish stories without acknowledgement and therefore, the study concludes that the newspapers do not seem to have learned any lesson from the Premium Times allegation as it relates to respecting ethics in the news production process.

Keywords: Journalism ethics, newspapers, acknowledgment, news stories, rule-based thinking theory, content analysis

Introduction

This study explores how Nigerian newspapers respect one of the basic ethics of journalism in their daily reporting of happenings in the country, acknowledgment of stories the papers published.

In 2013, *Premium Times,* an online Nigerian newspaper, published an article accusing some Nigerian newspapers of ethical flaws over a story the paper broke of a letter written by former President Olusegun Obasanjo to the then President Goodluck Jonathan. The paper, in an article titled 'Obasanjo's letter exposes Nigerian newspapers' ethical flaws', said that as it exposed the letter to the public, Nigerian newspapers failed flatly at the true test of ethics.

The paper conducted a content analysis of major newspapers in the country and found that majority of the newspapers published complete texts of the letter which was first revealed to the world by the online newspaper via its website without

acknowledging the paper as the original source of the story. The paper said the analysis indicated "alarming disregard for age-old professional ethics, which forbids plagiarism, non-acknowledgement of legitimate source of information, and the primacy of attribution as a foundation to truth telling in the mission of a newspaper" (Times, 2013).

Many of the flagship titles in the industry were accused of a professional gaffe. *The Guardian, Vanguard, Punch, Nigerian Tribune, Daily Trust* and *Leadership* all failed to disclose any original source for the story about the letter they published or acknowledged the *Premium Times* as their source. Other newspapers, including *The Nation, Blueprint*, *National Mirror* and *The Sun,* who also had the story from the letter as their cover story, did not mention the paper as their source as they all kept mum over the source of the information they published. The only departure from the crowd, according to the *Premium Times,* were *Thisday* and *People's Daily,* as they duly acknowledged the papers their source of the letter (Times, 2013).

However, 2 days after, precisely on December 14th, 2013, *Punch* refuted the *Premium Times* plagiarism claim and blamed the online medium for falsely accusing the paper of republishing its version of the letter without attribution. *The Punch* Editor, Martin Ayankola, said *Premium Times* was neither the source of the information used in their story nor the source of the texts published. He said: "If an online news medium publishes a document first, it does not by any means suggest that it was the only medium (print or online) with the information at the point in time" (Ayankola, 2013).

Ayankola also said the *Premium Times* would have avoided an "ethical flaw", and served its readers well, if it had been careful to comply with one of journalism's basic tenets by reaching out to the *Punch* for its side of the story. "This newspaper would have readily shared relevant information pertaining to our story, particularly, the fact that it was obtained from a source in the former President's office on December 11, 2013 and also provided emails and a PDF document containing the 18-page letter in its original (Ayankola, 2013). On the same day the *Punch* refuted the plagiarism claim, *Premium Times* replied to the paper saying that it stood by its story and provided evidence that the *Punch* indeed copied its story on the letter without attribution.

The then editor of the PT, Musikilu Mojeed said the *Punch* sought to trawl in available bedfellows in ethical infraction, suggesting that the PT failed to contact

it before levying charges of presumed ethical failure. He said: "*Punch* typically does good journalism but it appears the editorial managers think that is a sufficient shield against ethical failure which even the best media institutions, in all humility, have had to contend with, because, if nothing, that is sufficient to compromise the mission of the media to serve the public and democracy faithfully and effectively (Mojeed, 2013)".

Mojeed cited the *Punch's* first headline of the story entitled "Jonathan towing the path of Abacha – Obasanjo", which he said indicated that it was written by Segun Adeoye with "agency report". But its subsequent edition, "Obasanjo bombs Jonathan" totally dispensed with the alleged "agency" input in the story. "The simple question is what "agency" was *Punch* alluding to? We claim strongly and authoritatively that there is no agency that *Punch* is, as indeed, can refer to, but we wait to be educated on this" (Mojeed, 2013). The back and forth though, it is clear that there is an ethical dilemma on the issue.

The Nigerian Press Council's (NPC) Code of Ethics states that, "Journalism entails a high degree of public trust. To earn and maintain this trust, it is morally imperative for every journalist and every news medium to observe the highest professional and ethical standards" (NPC, 2024). The ethics number 13th in the Code also prohibits journalists from copying, wholesale or in part, other people's work without attribution. Ruby (2019) posits that it is important in journalism to appropriately attribute sources because it properly credits the source who provided third party subject matter expertise on a story.

A decade after the Premium Times analysis, this study examines some selected major Nigerian newspapers to find whether the practice of non-acknowledgment of stories has changed amongst newspapers in the country.

Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate how the *Daily Trust, Punch, The Nation* and *Vanguard* newspapers respect journalism's basic ethics of acknowledging sources in reporting stories they publish. The study has the following objectives:

1) Examine the extent to which major newspapers in Nigeria commit ethical flaws by not acknowledging sources of stories they publish?
2) Analyze the type of news sources used by the newspapers in reporting national events?

Literature Review

Qualitative interviews with top-level editors at twenty-eight newspapers across the United States (fourteen at "large" and fourteen at "small" newspaper organizations) revealed how community and newsroom size impact the ways editors conceptualize and deal with certain ethical dilemmas. The findings provide some support for the theory of "connectivity" in journalism: that journalists in small markets are likely to be more in touch with and more concerned with, community values than journalists in large markets. At large newspapers, journalists approach ethics with more concern for their newspapers' professional reputations, whereas journalists at small newspapers are more concerned about their newspapers' relationships with their communities (Reader, 2006).

In a study on education and work experience in newsrooms as predictors of ethical perceptions among communication undergraduates at a large Singaporean university, Detenber, Cenite, Malik and Neo surveyed 826 undergraduate students and examined how education and newsroom work experience help the communication students' perceptions of journalism ethics.

The findings of the study indicate that education was associated with ethical ideologies, the perceived importance of journalism ethics codes, the justifiability of using contentious news gathering methods, and concern towards journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. On the other hand, in this context, education was not a significant predictor of agreement with ethical principles or support for sanctions against journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. Ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) were associated with ethical principles and the degree to which using contentious news gathering methods was justifiable (Detenber, Cenite, Malik, & Neo, 2012).

The study also found that final-year students were more likely to express greater concern for journalistic plagiarism and fabrication than first year students. However, both groups of students did not differ in their level of support for penalties against plagiarism and fabrication. The authors concluded that: "It is possible that undergraduate education and work experience are effective in raising students' level of concern toward these types of transgressions but do not necessarily translate into support for harsher penalties on journalists who plagiarize and fabricate information" (Detenber, et al. 2012, p. 60).

In a similar study on differences and similarities in mass communication students' perceptions of plagiarism and fabrication at a major state university in the Midwest in the United States, Conway and Groshe found that students' perceptions of plagiarism and fabrication indicate an ethics gap in which students interested in journalistic areas (newspaper, magazine, broadcast, photojournalism, and online) are more concerned about journalistic ethics than students interested in non journalistic areas (public relations, advertising, graphic design, others). Students interested in journalistic areas also suggested harsher penalties for plagiarism and fabrication (Conway & Groshe, 2008).

The study also found that the ethics gain among non journalistic students increased to a nearly equivalent amount as journalistic students over the course of their respective university educations and training experiences, including student media work and internships. While ethics gaps do exist between journalistic and non journalistic students, ethics gains by all students from across levels of concern and severity of penalties indicate that students' ethical beliefs are malleable and show considerable growth during university education (Conway & Groshe, 2008).

In 2004, *The Guardian*'s media commentator, Roy Greenslade conducted a survey and found a large number of anonymous source stories in the home, business and foreign pages of national newspapers on February 16, 2004 in the United Kingdom (Wheeler, 2005).

Greenslade said what was clear from the survey of a single day's newspapers was that the practice of using anonymous sources in a variety of guises – insiders, onlookers, analysts, observers, friends – has not changed since Gilligan's report. Unnamed sources giving unattributable briefings remain the main sources or a key component of the art of storytelling, adding that without them, many of the stories the papers published would be less balanced and certainly less factual. "In one instance – a page three article in the *Sun* about Liz Hurley – the story would not have been published at all, since the whole of it rests on the claims made by 'a friend' " (Wheeler, 2005, p. 61).

Theoretical Background

Ethics, or moral values, is an acquired habit of the human intellect which enables its possessor to reason to true conclusions about the rightness or wrongness of human actions (Bourke 1966 in Pratt, 1988).

This study is based on the assumption of Rule-Based Thinking Theory. In the theoretical approach to decision making, a single ethical rule (such as truth or compassion) overrides all other considerations. Rule-based thinking is often connected to deontological theories. Subscription to high ethical standards has many rewards; a person or an organization would be valued and respected. Thus, organizations, professional bodies, religious organizations etc. whose activities are guided by ethical codes are respected and valued. "This truism applies equally to the media" (Akpabio, 2004) .

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) stated that the best-known deontological theory is the one associated with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who posited moral laws that define appropriate action in all situations. In sum, the theory posited that media organizations and journalists should be truthful in their work.

Methodology

The content analysis method was used to analyze the December 2023 editions of the selected newspapers to find how they acknowledged sources of the stories they published during the month. By using purposive sampling, The *Daily Trust, The Nation, Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers were selected to represent the major newspapers that *Premium Times* accused of plagiarism. The study considered hard news stories as the unit of analysis. The content categories used in the analysis included acknowledgment of the stories, type of source used, date of publication and the page where the stories were published.

The study analyzed 142 hard news stories published by the papers with the exception of weekend editions as they usually contain features and analysis of major stories during the week. Sports news stories published during the month were also excluded from the study. The least important and most important stories were selected from the first and last news pages of the selected newspapers respectively for the analysis.

Findings

The December 2023 editions of the four newspapers under study were analyzed. A total of 71 editions were available for the analysis *Daily Trust* (21 editions), *Punch* (17 editions), *The Nation* (14 editions) and Vanguard (19 editions). In other words, all *Daily Trust* editions were available, but two editions of *Vanguard* were not available (15th& 26th), four editions of *Punch* were missing (5th, 11th, 13th & 29th) and seven editions of *The Nation* were not found (1st, 11th, 15th, 19th, 26th, 27th& 29th). The study analyzed 142 hard news stories from the papers.

Table 1: Acknowledgment of Stories by Newspaper

		Acknowledgment		
		YES	NO	Total
Newspaper	*Daily Trust*	36	6	42
		85.7%	14.3%	100.0%
	Punch	32	2	34
		94.1%	5.9%	100.0%
	The Nation	16	12	28
		57.1%	42.9%	100.0%
	Vanguard	28	10	38
		73.7%	26.3%	100.0%
Total		112	30	142
		78.9%	21.1%	100.0%

The findings indicated that *The Nation* newspaper published the highest number of stories without acknowledgement though it had the least number of stories analyzed during the period under study. Out of the 28 stories analyzed, the paper did not acknowledge 12. The unacknowledged stories are spread across December 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 14th, 21st and 22nd. In a story published on December 6, on page 2 with the headline 'Fed Govt to prosecute sex, gender violence in schools, says Fagbemi', the paper cited The Attorney General of the Federation (AGF) and Minister of Justice, Prince Lateef Fagbemi (SAN), making the announcement without acknowledging the source of the story and without a by-line in the story to show the presence of its reporter at the event. In another related story published on December 21, on page 27 with headline 'Fed Govt to revive Ogun cassava industry', the paper did not acknowledge the story which was written to report the visit of the National Programme Manager of the Community and Social Development Projects, Olubunmi Bello, to Alapoti village, a major supply source of cassava. However, the paper indicates that the story was covered by its unnamed reporter.

In reporting findings for the *Vanguard* newspaper, Table one shows that the paper did not acknowledge 10 out of 38 stories analyzed in the study. The unacknowledged stories were published in the December 5th, 11th, 18th, 25th, 27th and 29th editions of the paper. On December 11, on page 3, the paper published a story with the headline 'IPMAN wants FG to fix Warri refinery, stop TAM' without acknowledgement. The story which attributed the call to fix the refinery

to a national member of the association, IPMAN Mid Western Zone at an Annual General Meeting of IPMAN Warri Depot, was published without acknowledging any media or agency and has no by-line to indicate the presence of the paper's reporter at the meeting. In a similar story published on December 25, on page 6 with the headline 'Police, Anambra community clash over disputed land' the paper published the story without a by-line and without acknowledging any media organization or agency.

Findings from Table one show that out of the 42 stories analyzed from stories published by *Daily Trust* during the period under study, six were not acknowledged. A story published on December 5 page 4, with the headline 'Farming key to sustainable growth – Minister' was not properly acknowledged by the paper. The story simply reported that the Minister of Agriculture, Senator Aliyu Sabi made the remarks while addressing journalists covering the Senate. However, the story neither has a by-line to indicate that the paper had a reporter present when the address took place nor did it acknowledge any media organization or agency as the source of the story. In another story published on December 20, page 5 with the headline 'Kukah to Tinubu: You have no excuses, God won't forgive you if you fail', the paper did not acknowledge source of the story but said Kukah made the statement while delivering his Christmas message in Sokoto though the story did not indicate that the paper's Sokoto reporter covered the event.

The findings also show that *Punch* newspaper had the fewest number of stories without acknowledgement. Out of the 34 stories analyzed during the period, two stories were not acknowledged by the paper. The first story was published on December 6, page 5 with the headline 'Hoodlums attack Lagos task team at Tincan Port', while the second unacknowledged story was published on December 8, page 37 with the headline 'Lagos plans new technical, vocational colleges'. In the first story, the paper said its correspondent learned and gathered without stating from where the correspondent learned or gathered the facts used in the story. However, the story also indicated an attempt to speak to the State Police Command's PPRO which was not successful. In the second story, *Punch* also did not acknowledge how the story about Lagos State plan to establish new technical and vocational colleges' story was sourced. The paper only cited the state Commissioner for Basic and Secondary Education, Mr Jamiu Alli-Balogun as the source for the story without stating where and how the commissioner made the announcement.

The papers under review published some of the unacknowledged stories without a by-line except for the *Punch*. *Daily Trust* has one unacknowledged story without a by-line; *Vanguard* has four stories and *The Nation* has eight stories without a by-line.

Table 2: Naming of news sources by newspaper

		Sources					
		Named	Unnamed	Both Named & Unnamed	Agency Report	No Source	Total
Newspaper	*Daily Trust*	32	1	2	6	1	42
		76.1%	2.3%	4.7%	14.2%	2.3%	100.0%
	Punch	25	1	7	1	0	34
		73.5%	2.9%	20.6%	2.9%	0.0%	100.0%
	The Nation	28	0	0	0	0	28
		100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Vanguard	36	2	0	0	0	38
		94.7%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total		121	4	9	7	1	142
		85.2%	2.8%	6.3%	4.9%	0.7%	100.0%

Table two shows how the papers named their news sources in reporting stories during the month under analysis. Surprisingly, the findings that indicate *The Nation* named all the news sources of the stories analyzed in the study though the paper has the highest number of stories without acknowledgment. This means that both the sources of the stories the paper lifted from other media organizations without acknowledgement and the ones written by its reporters were well named.

Punch newspaper was leading in using both named and unnamed sources in the stories published by the paper during the month while *Daily Trus*t had the highest number of stories originating from news agencies and *Vanguard* was leading in using unnamed sources in the study.

The table also shows that *Daily Trust* was the only paper that published a story without a source and without acknowledgment on December 29, page 27. The story with the headline ’25 agencies, ministries to spend N85bn on vehicles in 2024’ only presented statistics without attributing them to any source.

Discussion

Findings from this study have shown that a decade after the Premium Times plagiarism allegations against major Nigerian national dailies, the trend is still continuing. The papers do not seem to give much concern to one of the basic requirements of journalism profession as the NPC Code of Ethics requires media organizations and journalists not to copy, wholesale or in part, other people's work without attribution (NPC, 2024).

The findings show that two of the four newspapers, *The Nation* and *Vanguard,* published most of the unacknowledged stories, followed by *Daily Trust* and *Punch* which published only one story during the period. It is also clear that most of the unacknowledged stories were cleverly published without a by-line to look like agency reports and spare those who copied the stories without acknowledgement from any consequences when there is backlash. Wes Richards, a long time reporter and correspondent for ABC, CBS and NBC, in a social media post said "not only does the public have the right to know stuff, it has the right to know where the stuff came from," (Richards, 2020). Consequently, this finding has at least reiterated the practicing of 'good journalism' testimony credited to the *Punch* by the *Premium Times* when the former denied the plagiarism claims by the latter during the Obasanjo's letter saga.

Findings on how the papers named their news sources also show that *Daily Trust* and *Punch* newspapers attributed agency reports and used both named and unnamed sources in reporting their stories during the period. On the acceptability of using unnamed sources in journalism, LeNoi, (2023) said not only is it acceptable, but unnamed sources are critical to journalism because they protect people from retribution or revenge, while allowing them to expose danger, corruption or crime. However, he posited that the critical thing is that any information from an unnamed source needs to be corroborated by a second or third source as well, to ensure its authenticity. Where corroboration is not possible, good reporters and news organizations should make it clear that the allegations have not been supported yet.

The findings indicate that national dailies or journalists in Nigeria are using contentious news gathering methods, and have little concern towards journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. The findings are inconsistent with the rule-based thinking theory, which expects media and professional journalists to be truthful in their work.

However, what is not clear is whether the apparent disregard for plagiarism and fabrication among the journalists has a relationship with their educational background and or gap in the knowledge of journalism ethics as Conway and Groshe (2008) and Detenber, et al. (2012) studies found.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A decade after plagiarism allegations against major national dailies in Nigeria, the trend is still continuing as findings from this study indicate. Disregard for the NPC code of ethics is evident among many newspapers in the country.

The recommendation of this study is that the NPC needs to do something to sanitize the journalism industry in the country and as a way of continuing the study, future studies can investigate the relationship between concern for plagiarism and fabrication vis-à-vis the journalists' education and ethics gap.

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