Application of Code of Ethics among Journalists in Kano State, Nigeria

Mainasara Yakubu Kurfi, Ph.D.
Department of Mass Communication
Bayero University, Kano
GSM: +234 803 6306 472. E-mail: mykurfi@email.com

Abstract

Codes of Ethics are fundamental in any type of profession or trade. This is because they guide a practitioner to discharge his or her official responsibilities without fear or favour. Journalism as a profession of information gathering and dissemination is guided by some set of codes of conduct. On the other hand, press freedom is recognized with constitutional backing both at national and international levels. This paper attempts to discuss the application of press freedom and codes of ethics and their application or otherwise in journalism practice in Nigeria. The adopted social responsibility theory as a guiding principle. Likewise, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) was applied as the paper's method of data gathering among .some selected members of correspondents' chapel under the Nigerian Union of Journalists in Kano State. A total of nine practicing journalists were randomly selected from Correspondences' Chapel in Kano State. They discussed freedom of the press ir, practical sense and application of code of ethics in journalism practice from practitioners' perspective. The paper found that majority of the journalists were aware of the existence of the codes of ethics but there were challenges such inaccessibility to vital information, arrest and intimidations of journalists among others. These challenges restrain journalists from discharging their functions without fear or favour. Arising from the discussions, the paper recommends that journalists should be socially responsible in curf \ing-out their official responsibilities.

Introduction

The role of journalists in any society is fundamental. This is because, journalists are constitutionally responsible for informing, educating, enlightening, entertaining as well as setting agenda for public discussions regarding different issues of national and international interests. Considering the above functions of journalists, one can assert that mass media as a vehicle of information dissemination regarded as the *fourth estate of the realm.* Codes of ethics as contained in the constitution of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) are the guiding principles for journalists to carry-out their functions professionally and effectively. These codes are categorized as: Editorial Independence; Accuracy and Fairness; Privacy; Privilege/Non-Disclosure; Decency; Discrimination; Reward and Gratification; Children and Minors; Access to Information Public Interest; Social Responsibility; Plagiarism; Copyright; Press Freedom ahd Responsibility. It is expected that every journalist should abide strictly by the above codes in journalism practice.

Press freedom on the other hand is significant and necessary for journalists to discharge their functions freely. It is as a result of this necessity that it has always been argued that in spite of journalists[1] role in the society, they cannot perform their functions without freedom from intimidation. The former president of the United States of America George W. Bush once reminded a gathering while speaking during the 2008 *World Press Freedom Day,* that press freedom was enshrined in the first amendment of the U. S. Constitution, which is a necessity for a free society. This makes press freedom a fundamental right guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the African Charter on Human and

Peoples Rights (ACHPR).Going by the above provision, the constitutional powers and duties or obligation of the press are to help government realize the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy as contained in the constitution. The press is also expected to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people. In other words, the press performs a nation building role (development journalism) as well as being a watchdog of government actions or inactions pertaining to governance, transparency and accountability.

On the other hand, there are other constitutional provisions in the Nigerian constitution restraining the provision of section 22. Some of these provisions include laws on: defamation of character, seditious publications, contempt of court and blasphemy among others. Apart from these restrains, another problem is that journalists are subjected to all forms of intimidation, torture, imprisonments and in some cases assassinations. It is as a result of the above enumerated problems that journalists all over the world particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria find it difficult to abide strictly by the journalism code of ethics and enjoy the press freedom in journalism practice.

Code of Ethics in Journalism Practice

Code of Ethics is an essential ingredient in professions such as Medicine, Engineering, Law, Accounting and Journalism among others. Ethics are sets of rules and regulations guiding the conduct of any profession. In journalism, code of ethics is not only essential but necessary in order to make journalists and media organizations as a vehicle of information dissemination credible and reliable. Unfortunately, some journalists who are self-centered and unprofessional violate the provisions of the code of ethics in the process of discharging their responsibilities. Writing on incessant violations of code of ethics by the Nigerian journalists, Akinfeleye in the *Sunday Triumph* newspaper (2007, p.29) laments that:

> It is regrettable that some recent events covered by some media houses have not been reflective of the most desired journalistic integrity in their reportage. The press, democracy, moral values, accountability and journalistic integrity, if I was asked to say which one of these terms comes first and which of the concepts can promote and sustain meaningful democracy and an enduring and incorruptible fourth estate of the realm, during the 21^{sl} century Nigeria, I will not hesitate a moment to say that morality, values and journalistic integrity, come first and they should be pre-conditions for the attainment of the other concepts for sustenance of a free, responsible and responsive press.

It is worthy to note that the existence of credible journalists particularly in a democratic society is not only profound but very necessary for the society to develop politically, economically, educationally and in other aspects of human endeavor. This credibility could be attributed to why democracy and journalism operate hand-in-hand to the extent of regarding mass media as *the fourth estate of the realm.* In 2000, *Media Rights Monitor* reported that after its efforts to free Nigeria from military dictatorship, some media organisations are characterized by a crisis of corruption and unethical practices that threatens the democratic government it fought so hard to enthrone more than ever in its over 100 years of history. Alleged unethical conduct by the Nigerian journalists and media groups has

aroused concern nationally and internationally. Such concerns have been expressed privately and publicly by stakeholders in media industry.

In an attempt to underscore the significance of code of ethics in journalism practice, Odunewu (2000, p. 101) maintains that "while morality refers to the behavior that is acceptable, ethics deal with the criteria by which decision about rights and wrongs are made". This is to say according to Odunewu that while code of ethics gives you a reason why a behavior is right, morality is what people in the society agree to be wrong or right. Considering the role played by the mass media particularly in contemporary society which could impact positively or negatively in ihc society, it is necessary lor journalists in different media organizations to take issues related to code ol ethics seriously. M'bayo (2006) writes that the code of ethics in journaliMii practice is everybody's business and not just those of journalism professionals and this is so because what media practitioners do and don't do have implications on the society as a whole. Though there are government and nongovernmental regulatory agencies such as Nieerian Press Council (NPC), National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) and Guild of Editors (GE) among others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with the set rules and regulations in both print and broadcast media operations, yet, journalists are involved in unethical practices. Likewise, the individual journalists can regulate themselves by ensuring total compliance with the stipulated rules and regulations in journalism practice. The press ought to be socially responsible to themselves, to their respective media organizations and to the society at large.

Press Freedom and Journalism Practice

The society and constitutional provisions have provided the journalists an important role of information dissemination, ensuring good governance and setting agenda for the public. This important role of the media makes the press and the government inseparable. For journalists to perform the above mentioned functions, there is basically the need for the journalists to be free, thus, the need for press freedom. To support the vital functions of the press constitutionally, international and national treaties back the press in their various constitutions. In national treaty for instance, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 22 provides that: *"the press, radio, television and other agencies of mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people".*

Section 22 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution particularly where it says. "the media are empowered at all times be free to uphold the fundamental principles of governance'[1], means that the press has the constitutional rights and obligations to ensure that government is responsible and accountable to the citizens in the society. The press also has the lights to gather, interpret and disseminate information to the general public who on the other hand have the rights to know what is happening in the society regarding issues affecting their lives directly or indirectly. However, journalists not only in Nigeria are faced with series of challenges which are considered as impediments to exercising press freedom. Some of these challenges include limitations to freedom of expression-and inaccessibility to sources of vital information. It was as a result of inaccessibility to information that the Nigerian journalists and other stakeholders agitated for the passing of Freedom of Information bill. Though the bill has been passed into law, vital information is still not accessible to the journalists. Government's agencies' denial of vital information could he attributed to their argument of protecting national security and national interest. Thus not all government activities are made public.

To this end, it can be concluded that press freedom and application of code of ethics in journalism practice particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria is allowed to some extent and restricted to a large exlent due to the government constitutional limitations through various laws or acts.

Theoretical framework

This paper adopted social responsibility theory as its theoretical framework with a view to explain the supposed role of journalists in an ideal situation. This theory is one of the six normative theories of the press which posit that the media must at all times remain free from government control and on the other hand, must serve the public without fear or favour. Historically, social responsibility theory was traced to the commission on freedom of the press headed by Robert M. Hutchins, former president of University of Chicago. The commission was set up in the United States of America and funded by *Time Magazine* in 1947, immediately after the end of World War II to "seek a modern restatement underscoring the value of a press in America" (Pasque et al 1990, p.262). The commission produced a report titled *"The Press and Responsible Press"* that advocated the adoption of professional code of ethics among journalists in both print and electronic media. Social responsibility theory continued to develop following the concerns that the libertarian theory had some short-comings regarding the so-called free market of ideas which failed to yield the expected benefits of the society. Rather, the commercial development of the press and unforeseen developments in the media technology had tended to limit access to the media for individuals and groups and to concentrate media power in the hands of a few business men and media professionals who had the capital to set up media empires. These situations and lowering of public taste made Americans think that the media had to be kept to certain social standards, while at the same time ensuring preservation of press freedom.

Some of the basic assumptions of this theory as enumerated by McQuail, (1987) are that:

- The media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to the society.
- The media can meet these obligations by setting high standards of professionalism, truth, accuracy and objectives; and
- Media professionals should be accountable to the society as well as their employers and the market.

Social responsibility theory argues that freedom without responsibility is dangerous. Moreover rivalry and partiality on the part of media owners and the quest for objectivity on the part of the media professionals could create problems for the society. Therefore, the social responsibility theorists recommend that the press should put public interest first and not shortchange the public on disclosure of information. This paper attempts to discuss code of ethics and their application or otherwise among journalists in Kano State and on the other hand, social responsibility theory advocates that journalists should be socially responsible by being accurate, objective and accountable to the government and the citizens in the larger society. As such, the relationship between this study and the theory is a complimentary one.

Method of Data Collection

This paper used Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as its methodology. The method was employed in order to understand the perception, experiences, attitudes and behavior of the participants. An FGD group could comprise 8 to 12 participants to be drawn from the identified population. The entire population of the members of correspondents' chapel, Kano State was 29. As such a sample of nine members was drawn. Twelve questions were asked with a moderator who led the discussions. Tape recorder and writing materials were used as instruments of data collection in recording the responses of the respondents.

Findings and discussions

As stated in the methodology that Focus Group Discussions (FGD) method was used in data collection, 12 questions were raised and discussed by the respondents. The following are the findings and discussions from the members of the panel.

Question one takes care of the general introduction of all the members. While question two asked: As practicing journalists, are you aware of the media ethics in journalism profession? If yes, what is your understanding of those ethics? In answering these questions, all the members of the panel admitted that they are aware of media ethics and these ethics according to them are guiding principles. For instance, Anwar, one of the discussants said:

> We are aware of the existence of these ethics and they are guiding principles that govern us on the way we conduct ourselves as journalists on how to gather news items, how to process it, and how to disseminate it for the consumption of the public. We have the ethics and we are expected to behave according to certain standards of the profession.

From the above it can be said that majority of the journalists are very much aware and familiar with the existence of the code of ethics in journalism practice in Nigeria. However, they admitted that abiding by the ethics is a different issue, entirely.

Question three asked: Are those ethics relevant to journalism practice in Nigeria? If yes how? The respondents unanimously admitted that the ethics are relevant in journalism practice in the sense that they move you away from being and individual person to professional person. Contributing to the question, Jack says:

> Journalism code of ethics are relevant in practicing the profession but, at the same time we should understand that were our rights stop another person's rights begin. For instance, there are issues such as defamation of character and malicious publications among others which are considered.as limitations to these rights. As an individual, somebody could be saying something bad against you and you wish you could go ahead and insult the person as well but as a journalist .there is that situation you discover that once you do that become partial by the objectives of the profession. So the ethics tend to guide us to what to do and what not to do.

Ethics according to the discussants are very relevant and significant in journalism profession. And this could be the reason why every profession or discipline has its own rules and regulations that serve as guiding principles for the practitioners to carry-out their responsibilities diligently.

Question four asked: Do you consider media ethics as guiding principle in your routine job, if yes, how? All the discussants agreed that codes of ethics are guiding principles in their routine work as journalists. Contributing on this question, Umar recalled that a typical example on how codes of ethics serve as guiding principles in journalism practice guided him recently. In his words:

> I interviewed the Director, Vehicle Inspection Officer (VIO) of Kano State where he rendered all abuses on members .of the Federal Roads Safety Commission (FRSC) accusing them for issuing illegal driving licenses, after recording what the

> director said, I told him that I will verify his claim from the Commandant of Road Safety Commission of Kano State because the ethics of my profession require me to do that. I interviewed the Commandant and he narrated his own view on the issue. This is what is called balancing in journalism and without the ethics I may not be able to do that.

The above example as stated by Umar is a clear example that codes of ethics guide journalists' to be fair, just and objective in discharging their official responsibilities. Habib, another participant maintains that:

> These codes are guiding principles but we as journalists have to believe that we cannot do without it because in as much as we work for the interest of the public with different religious and cultural beliefs, understandings, and experiences, there is the need for us to have a rule that guide us to be fair to everyone.

Question five asked: To what extent can you say the media ethics have contributed to the development of journalism profession in Nigeria? This question tried to find out the extent to which media ethics contributed to the development of journalism as a profession of news gathering and dissemination. The respondents discussed the issues extensively and argued that codes of ethics did not contribute to the development of journalism practice particularly in Nigeria which is characterized with many challenges which include compromising of standard by superior officers who sometimes compel a reporter to file a report which is unbalanced, bias and self-centered. Another issue, according to them, has to do with threats from the people who may pick offence as a result of a story which did not augur well for them. These challenges and constraints among others are serious hindrance for journalists to fully apply the ethics into practice.

Question six asks: In what ways do you think media ethics can help Nigerian journalists to compete favorably with their counter parts in developing countries such as United States of America? In an attempt to answer this question, Adeola states that:

> We all know America seems to be a model in the practice of journalism because everything was American because of the role media played to advance it growth and development. So, Nigeria uses America as a bench mark. These ethics can help the Nigerian journalists the same way it made American journalism thick especially the first amendment as contained in the United States of American constitution which backs freedom of speech. This amendment strengthens the practice of the media in developing countries.

From the above submission, it can be said that codes of ethics serve as guiding principle for Nigerian journalists by assisting them in discharging their official responsibility of news gathering and dissemination. Also, these codes can help in the development of journalism practice in Nigeria especially when practicing journalists are compelled by the Nigerian Union of Journalists to strictly abide by them.

Question seven asked: With the Freedom of Information Act in place, can we now say journalists are free in discharging their constitutional responsibilities in Nigeria? While contributing in this regard, Habib believes that journalists are not free even with passing into law the *Freedom of Information Act.* He argues that most of the federal and state

governments' organizations from where people seek information are not willing to cooperate. Though, freedom of information is one of the global initiatives to which Nigeria is a party but apart from the uncooperative nature of government organizations there is also the issue of revealing source of information. As a result of these two constraints, it can be concluded that freedom of information act has not in anyway made Nigerian Journalists free.

Question eight asked: Do you see some of the Nigerian constitutional provisions such as defamation of character, contempt of court, sedition and blasphemy among others as obstacle to press freedom? The discussants stated that constitutional provisions cannot be said to be obstacles to press freedom in any way. Some of the members argue that freedom can never be limitless because where someone's freedom ends, is the beginning of another's right. If there are no constitutional limitations such as defamation of-character and seditious publication among others, there will certainly be violations of law and order which may lead to chaos and lawless society.

Question nine queried that: There is this believe that Nigerian journalists enjoy freedom in practicing, the profession compared to other journalists in Africa and Asia. How true is this? The-discussants admitted that Nigerian journalists enjoy freedom in carrying-out their; functions to some extent but, there are a lot of challenges restraining journalist from discharging their functions freely and without fear or favour, Spme of these challenges include inaccessibility to vital information, threats, arrest, torture and intimidations by security agents among others. They maintained that if these happen to journalists frequently, then the issue of freedom of the press .does not even arise.

Question ten asked: Journalists are-often accused of abusing freedom of the press through some of their actions such as deliberate accusations or unsubstantiated statements; how true is this? The discussions reveal that there is no two-ways about the fact that some journalists abuse freedom of the press by operating contrary to the codes of ethics such as distortions of facts and figures, collection of brown envelop and supporting' some politicians to ridicule an opponent.

Question eleven asked: What are' the challenges you are -facing as journalists with regard to exercising freedom of the press? The discussants mentioned many challenges which include participation of quacks in journalism without formal training in journalism or mass communication; abuse of code of ethics; inaccessibility to vital information; lack of prompt payment of salaries and other entitlements; threats and lack of training for journalists by their media organizations they are working for. These challenges compelled journalists to sometimes compromise standard and operate contrary to the provisions of code of ethics.

Question twelve asked: What solutions can you suggest to address some of the challenges you have mentioned? Members of the panel enumerated some of the possible ways that can be used in addressing the problems which include employing people with at least diploma in mass communication or journalism as journalists as contained in the code of ethics of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). Other solutions are training and re-training of journalists particularly on the ethical conduct of the profession; media organizations should be paying journalists their salaries and other entitlements as at when due. The discussants are of the view that if these possible solutions can be taken into consideration, there is no doubt some of the challenges highlighted above may be alleviated to some extent if not eradicated in totality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined press freedom and the concept of media codes of ethics and its application or otherwise by Nigerian journalists. Some members of the Correspondents' Chapel of the Nigerian Union of Journalists in Kano State participated in Focus Group Discussions who responded to some questions raised by the paper. Arising from the findings, the paper recommends that media organizations and indeed all Nigerians must be vigilant, remain resolute, and continue to resist any attempt to infringe on their constitutional rights.Law enforcement agencies should also stop the indiscriminate abuse and violations of the rights of Nigerians. Journalists should be socially responsible in the process of discharging their constitutional responsibilities of news gathering and dissemination.

References

African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR)

Akinfeleye, R. (2007) *Media in Nigeria: Dialectic Issues in Nigeria Journalism.* Lagos: Nelson publishers Ltd.

Asika, N. (1991) *Researeh Methodology in the Behavioral Science.* Enugu: Longman Nigeria Pic.

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) as amended.

Constitution of the Nigerian Union of Journalists Freedom of Information Act, (2014).

George W. Bush (2008) speech on the World Press Freedom Day Journalists Journal (2008). *The Role of Journalism in Democracy.* Retrieved May 20, 2011 from www.....

M'Bayo, R.T. (2006). *The Handbook far Journalism Studies:* NY: Edwin Mellen.

McQuail, D. (1987). *Theories of Communication.* London: Sage Publications Limited.

Media Rights Monitor (2000) Reports.

Merrill, J.C. (1982). Ethics and Journalism, in *Ethics and the press: Readings in Mass Media Morality.* New York: Hastings House publishers.

Omenugha, K. (2008). News Commercialization, Ethics and Objectivity in Journalism Practice in Nigeria: Strange bedfellows. Oji: .Delta Slate University, Nigeria.

Pasque, et al *(1990), Press Freedom in Nigeria.*

Tell Magazine (1997) publication.\

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Appendix I

(Questions for the Focus Group Discussions)
Code of Ethics and Press Freedom in Nigeria: Focus Group Discussions with Some Members of Correspondents' Chapel, Kano State

I am Mainasara Yakubu Kuril, Ph.D. an academic staff with the Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University, Kano, conducting a study on the application of code of ethics in journalism practice in Nigeria and the issue of press freedom as well as the limitations to absolute free on the other hand. Members of the correspondences' chapel are selected for Focus Group Discussions. Information provided in the discussions is for academic purpose only, Thank you.

1. Introduce yourself and your medium
2. As practicing journalists, are you aware of the media ethics in journalism profession? If yes, what is your understanding of those ethics?
3. Are those ethics relevant to journalism practice in Nigeria? If ycshow?
3. Do you consider media ethics as guiding principle in your routine job? If yes, how?
4. To what extent can you say the media ethics have contributed to the development of journalism profession in Nigeria?
5. In what way do you think media ethics can help Nigerian journalists to compete favorably with their counter parts in developing countries such as United Slates of America?
6. With the Freedom of Information Act in place, can we now say journalists are free in discharging their constitutional responsibilities in Nigeria?
7. Do you see that some of the Nigerian constitutional provisions such as defamation of character, contempt of court, sedition and blasphemy among others as obstacle to press freedom?
8. There is this believe that Nigerian journalists enjoy freedom in practicing the profession compared to other journalists in Africa and Asia. How true is this?
9. Journalists are often accused of abusing freedom of the press through some of their actions such as deliberate accusations or unsubstantiated statements, how true is this?
10. What are the challenges you are facing as journalists with regard to exercising freedom of the press?
11. What solutions can you proffer to address some of the challenges you have mentioned?

Appendix II

(List of Discussants)

1. Ada Bisong Ononyc - Africa Independent Television (AIT)
2. Samaila Ahmad Dabai - Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, Kaduna
3. Jacob Adeola Ajakaiye - Business Day newspaper
4. Abba Anwar - Guardian newspaper
5. Jack Acheme - Voice of Nigeria (VON)
6. Kolawole Omoniyi - Cool F. M. /Wazobia F . M.
7. Hisham Habib - Today's Impact newspaper
8. Abdulsalam Muhammed - Vanguard newspaper
9. Muhammed Kabir Ya'u - Telegraph newspaper