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The Role of Media Ethics in Shaping Public Perception: A Critical Analysis of Biased Reporting and Its Impact on Public Opinion

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of media ethics in shaping public perception, with a specific focus on biased reporting and its impact on public opinion in Nigeria. Through a comprehensive literature review and analysis of case studies, the paper provides an overview of media ethics, highlighting the fundamental principles of objectivity, fairness, accuracy, and accountability. It emphasizes the essential role that these ethics play in ensuring the provision of unbiased and reliable information to the public. Furthermore, the paper explores the significant responsibility that media organizations hold in safeguarding the public's right to accurate and impartial news reporting. Drawing on extensive research, the paper delves into the concept of biased reporting and its potential effects on public opinion. The paper explores the methods used by media outlets to manipulate public opinion, including agenda-setting, framing, and selective exposure of facts and how this can reinforce existing beliefs and polarize society. In conclusion, this paper sheds light on the crucial role of media ethics in shaping public perception, critically analyzes the impact of biased reporting on public opinion, emphasizing the need for media organizations to adhere to ethical principles of objectivity, fairness, accuracy, and accountability. The paper gives an in-depth understanding of the implications of biased reporting, encourages and highlights the importance of ethical journalism in maintaining a healthy society. The paper stressed the strategic role of the government and regulatory bodies at ensuring ethical conduct in the media to combat biased reporting and among other recommendations called

for self-regulation in the media to maintain the integrity and credibility of journalism.

Keywords: Media Ethics, Public Perception, Biased Reporting, Public Opinion, Role of Media, Nigeria

Introduction

In a diverse country like Nigeria, the media serves as a crucial platform for information dissemination and public engagement. The ethical conduct of journalism and the accurate portrayal of information are fundamental in ensuring that the media is objective as rightly put by Nkwachi (2015), cited in Pepple & Acholonu (2018, p.57) that "as an institution bestowed with the responsibility of protecting public interest, the mass media strive to play this noble role which the society bestowed on them, that is to be socially responsible". This article critically examines the role of media ethics in shaping public perception, with a specific focus on biased reporting and its impact on public opinion in Nigeria.

The ethical principles that underpin journalism are essential for safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the media. Ethical reporting upholds the public's right to accurate, balanced, and fair information and that is why Nasidi (2016, p.1) expatiates that "media can contribute a lot to a society, it can change opinions because they have access to people and this gives it a lot of strength, this strength can either be used constructively by educating the people or it can be used destructively".

In Nigeria, the prevalence of biased reporting across various media platforms has raised significant concerns about its implications for public opinion and democratic governance, it further endorsing the submission by Ajia (1994) cited in Tsegyu & Asemah (2014, p.7) that "Nigerian journalists have been found wanting, both in expertise and in credibility; several people who are practicing journalism in Nigeria did not receive adequate training due to lack of manpower in the media industry in Nigeria". According to Tsegyu & Asemah (2014, p.2) citing Asemah (2011), most of the unethical problems are associated with bribery, corruption, sycophancy, conflict of interest, sensationalism, character assassination and lots of other ethical issues. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the relationship between media ethics, biased reporting, and public opinion in Nigeria. By critically analyzing pertinent case studies and theoretical frameworks, the study endeavors to elucidate the impact of biased reporting on public perception and

seeks to underscore the imperative of upholding ethical standards in journalism to mitigate the adverse effects of biased reporting and engender a more informed and discerning public.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this paper is to critically analyze the role of media ethics in shaping public perception through a study of biased reporting on public opinion in Nigeria.

Key Objectives:

1. To understand the concept of media ethics and its importance in journalism.
2. To analyze the impact of biased reporting on public opinion formation in Nigeria.
3. To identify the factors contributing to biased reporting in Nigerian media.
4. To examine the consequences of biased reporting on public perception.
5. To propose strategies for promoting media ethics and reducing biased reporting in Nigeria.
6. To provide recommendations for media organizations and regulatory bodies on ensuring ethical journalism practices to enhance public trust and perception.

Literature Review

The relationship between media and ethics is crucial in shaping public discourse, influencing societal values, and promoting well-informed citizens as emphasized by Merrill, (2011) that media ethics concerns right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse actions taken by people working in the field of journalism and mass communication while reporting on issues in Egbulefu & Adeyeye (2018). Black, Steele and Barney (1995) observed that "for excellent journalism practice, ethical issues must be considered paramount by journalists to stem the tide of mounting resentment from a highly critical public. The approach is doing ethics, a belief that good ethical decision making in journalism is a craft and skill comparable to good writing, good photography and good editing. If done it will ensure that journalists can maximize the truth telling obligation, while minimizing harm to vulnerable news sources and consumers".

Good ethical decision making is crucial for maintaining the profession's integrity and trustworthiness. In journalism, ethics has to do with duty to self and to others, Merrill (2011) cited in Egbulefu & Adeyeye (2018) as Enobakhare (2013) pointed out in Egbulefu & Adeyeye (2018) that "journalists should realize that their social responsibility requires them to always act within the ethics of their profession".

Theoretical Framework

Media organisations influence what people see, hear and read and the role of media ethics in public perception is intertwined with various communication theories that address how bias in reporting can impact public opinion, hence this paper is anchored on the communication theories; the agenda-setting, framing, and cultivation.

The Agenda-Setting Theory

First coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972, the agenda-setting theory suggests that media has the power to influence public opinion by determining the importance of topics and issues through extensive coverage, elaborating the connection in terms of relationships between the emphasis that the mass media put as an issue and the media audiences or the public's reaction or attributes to such issue, Littlejohn and Foss (2009) as cited in Zain (2014). When media outlets heavily focus on certain topics, they direct the public attention towards those issues while ignoring others. This theory can be applied to understand how certain issues are framed in a biased manner, leading to distorted public perception and influencing what the public considers important, thereby shaping their opinions and attitudes.

The Framing Theory

The concept of framing focuses on how media content can shape the way audiences perceive and interpret information. Arowolo (2017) said "framing is related to the agenda-setting theory but focuses on the essence of issues at hand rather than on a particular topic". Biased reporting can manipulate the framing of news stories to favor certain viewpoints, thereby shaping public perceptions in a particular direction, leading to a distorted understanding of events or issues. Media organizations may use selective reporting, emphasis on certain aspects, or specific language to shape perceptions and generate desired reactions from the public. Such framing can lead to highly polarized or one-sided views among the public.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation is a sociocultural theory regarding the role of television in shaping viewers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values Gerbner & Gross (1976) in Shrum (2017). Shrum further notes that as cultivation is a sociocultural theory, the three components—media institutions, message production, and message effects on viewers—are inextricably intertwined. In the context of biased reporting, persistent exposure to biased content can cultivate specific beliefs and opinions among the public. For example, if media disproportionately focuses on crime committed by a specific demographic, it can create an impression that this group is more prone to criminal activity among the public, leading to prejudice and discrimination.

Understanding Media Ethics

Every profession has its ethics; they are the code of conduct, set of moral principles or values that guide a profession, the behavior and actions of individuals in a particular profession.

Plaisance (2021) points out that "in journalism, truth is considered an "absolute" rather than an instrumental value: it is important not only for what it does but as an end in itself. Truth seeking is what sets journalism apart from all other forms of communication" Therefore, as an institution with the responsibility of protecting public interest, the mass media strive to play this noble role which the society bestowed on them, that is to be socially responsible Nkwachi (2015) cited in (Pepple & Acholonu, 2018).

In Ifedayo (1999), "the thrust of ethics is on individual culpability. He notes that while law emphasizes accountability, ethics emphasizes responsibility". Professional ethics in journalism serves as a framework for professionals to make informed decisions and choices based on the best interests of the society, that is why the importance of impartiality, accuracy, transparency, and fairness in reporting cannot be overlooked in engendering a well-informed society.

1. **Impartiality:** Impartiality means presenting information without bias or favoritism towards any particular individuals, groups, or ideologies. Impartial reporting helps build trust with the audience and maintains the integrity of the news media.
2. **Accuracy:** Accuracy involves reporting information that is factually correct, reliable, and free from errors or misinformation. Journalists have a responsibility to verify their sources, cross-check information, and present it in a manner that reflects the truth.
3. **Transparency:** Transparency in reporting means being open and honest about the sources, methods, and motivations behind the information being presented. Transparency enhances the credibility of journalists and media organizations.
4. **Fairness:** Fairness requires presenting a balanced and inclusive perspective on an issue by representing all relevant viewpoints, even if they conflict with one's own beliefs. Fair reporting helps avoid misrepresentation, and ensures that all affected parties are treated justly.

By adhering to the principles of impartiality, accuracy, transparency, and fairness in reporting, journalists contribute to the public's trust in the media.

Biased Reporting and Its Impact on Public Opinion

Journalists, may intentionally or unintentionally, favor one perspective over others, resulting in a skewed presentation of the news. This bias can manifest itself through selective coverage, framing, or even omission of certain facts or viewpoints.

According to Gordon, Kittross, Merrill, Babcock and Dorsher (2011), "media ethics is not an oxymoron- a contradiction in terms -nor is it a fixed set of rules or laws as in medicine or theology neither is it a clear list of do's and don'ts or blacks and whites, instead it is believed that media ethics is an essential process that evolves with the world in which media operate, and on which the media report- a seemingly endless array of grey areas where issues and appropriate courses of action aren't always obvious".

Different scholars and researchers have come up with different meanings of who a journalist should be and what they should represent.

The Reuters Handbook (2008) gives a succinct outline of who a journalist is, It includes: always holds accuracy sacrosanct, always corrects an error openly, always strives for balance and freedom from bias, always reveals a conflict of interest to a manager, always respects privileged information, always protects their sources from the authorities, always guards against putting their opinion in a news story, never fabricates or plagiarize, never alters a still or moving image beyond the requirements of normal image enhancement, never pays for a story and never accepts a bribe as cited in Andrew Ali Ibbi (2016). However, Ward (2011) notes that the media revolution is causing a simultaneous revolution in media ethics. He mentions that professional journalists who once dominated the media sphere now share the space with tweeters, bloggers, citizen journalists and social media users around the world hence challenging the foundation of media ethics.

Media bias in journalism however has been in public discourse for decades highlighting the tendency for journalists and news organizations to present news in a way that aligns with their own personal beliefs or the interests of the organization. This bias can manifest in a variety of ways, including the selection of which stories to cover, the framing of those stories, the language used, and the emphasis placed on certain aspects of a story over others. For instance, if a news organization consistently reports on a particular political issue from only one perspective, it may lead viewers to believe that this is the only valid interpretation of the situation thereby creating a polarized public opinion and contribute to a lack of understanding or empathy for alternative viewpoints. This situation has also led to the shaping of public trust in news organizations. When individuals perceive that the news they consume is biased or untrustworthy, they may become less likely to engage with news media or to believe the information presented.

It is important to note that media bias is not necessarily always intentional as Bozell and Baker (1990), in Rodrigo- Gines (2023) reference that "the media bias is not intentional, but rather depends on the background of the journalists". Journalists and news organizations are human and may be influenced by their own biases, the pressures of deadlines, and the need to attract and retain audiences.

Relationship Between Media and Ethics

The relationship between media and ethics encompasses various key relationships. These relationships are crucial for understanding the impact of media on society and the ethical considerations that arise in the realm of media and communication.

a. **Truth and Accuracy:** Journalistic integrity demands that media professionals strive to present information that is truthful, verified, and free from bias. The relationship between media and ethics is therefore based on the responsibility of the media to provide the public with factual and reliable information. Accuracy must be a central norm in journalism, this stance according to Poriezza (2019) is central in the Reuters Handbook of Journalism as it declares: "Accuracy is at the heart of what we do, it is our job to get it first, but it is above all our job to get it right. Accuracy as well as balance, always takes precedence over speed". Historical facts on the aspect of journalism norms according to Poriezza was the establishment of the fact-checking practice by Time Magazine in 1923. Hence accuracy is about information that has been thoroughly checked to ensure its credibility.

b. **Objectivity and Bias:** The relationship between media and ethics is evident in the need for journalists and media outlets to present information in a fair and impartial manner, without allowing personal or organizational biases to influence the content. In this respect Yat (2007) points out that the "success of objective journalism depends on the integrity of the practitioners and the norms to which they are committed".

c. **Privacy and Intrusion:** Media and ethics involves a delicate balance when it comes to respecting individual privacy. Media professionals must navigate the ethical considerations of privacy rights when reporting on public figures and private individuals. This relationship is defined by the need to uphold the public's right to information while respecting the privacy and dignity of individuals involved in news stories. Therefore, to guarantee this privacy Lukacs (2021) and Thomson (2018) in Nyitse, Odeba & Ogbu (2023, p.145) asserts that the "right to be left alone" is intended to guarantee protection against the uninvited or unlawful disclosure of private information, including facts, ideas and emotions hence some information is personal and should be handled as such.

d. **Sensationalism and Responsible Reporting:** Sensationalism, which involves the use of exaggerated stories to capture attention, often conflicts with the ethical obligation of media to report responsibly and without causing harm. The media's choices in content and presentation directly impacts the society. Journalists should avoid sensationalising news stories, though they are

gatekeepers, whatever they select to put out should be objectivity-based which is against sensationalism (Iyorkyaa, Bo &Tine 2020, p.12).

e. **Influence and Accountability:** The relationship between media and ethics highlights the influence of the media on public opinion and societal attitudes. The media is accountable for the impact of its content on individuals and communities, and ethical considerations encompass the need for transparency, accountability, and the promotion of public interest. The media must treat their various stakeholders responsibly so that journalism can fulfill its manifold social functions without external control (McQuail, 2013 in Fengler, 2019).
f. **Diversity and Representation:** Striving for more inclusive and collaborative community journalism is a pragmatic and journalistic imperative Ford, Gonzales & Quade (2020, p.59). Ethical considerations emerge when media fails to represent marginalized voices and perpetuates stereotypes or discrimination. The relationship between media and ethics requires a commitment to inclusivity, fairness, and accurate representation of diverse perspectives in media narratives.
g. **Corporate Interests and Independence:** Media organizations are often driven by commercial pressures and corporate agendas, which can pose ethical challenges. Media ethics demand a delicate balance between financial sustainability and editorial autonomy and the International Press Institute believes that innovation empowers media outlets to achieve editorial independence and financial sustainability (IPI, 2023).
h. **Social Responsibility and Public Interest:** Media professionals have an ethical obligation to serve the public by providing information that is in the best interest of society. This relationship ensures that the media acts as a responsible watchdog. The public's expectation from the media is high, hence the code of ethics of the Nigeria Press Council which among other things states that there is the need for a journalist to promote universal principles of human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace and international understanding while striving to enhance national unity and public good.

The Nigeria Press Code of Conduct

The Nigerian press code of ethics was adopted in 1978 by the Nigerian press organization. Three media bodies in Nigeria subscribed to the code of ethics and conduct which is today being enforced by the Nigerian Press Council. These are the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN). The Guild of Editors monitor the ethical behaviors of journalists; the Nigeria Union of Journalists is the professional

as well as trade union arm of professionals and the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria is association of employers in the print media (Ifedayo,2014).

In the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) code of conduct, decisions concerning the content of the news should be the responsibility of professional journalists and this includes the public's right to factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting. The code went further to say that a journalist should reframe from publishing inaccurate and misleading information and where such information has been inadvertently published, prompt correction should be made; and lastly in the course of his duties, a journalist should strive to separate fact from conjecture and comment as cited in (Ifedayo,2014, p.108).

An ethical code is without doubt a sine qua non in any profession. the code of ethics is therefore, the companion of the practicing journalist in providing ethical guidelines by which practitioners can judge and be judged.

Causes and Motivations Behind Biased Reporting

Biased reporting in journalism can stem from the nature of the media industry, the influence of individual journalists' beliefs, external pressures, among others. Key factors causing and motivating biased reporting media ownership and financial pressures, journalists' bias, political pressure, competition and ratings and pressure to meet deadlines among others:

1. **Media Ownership and Financial Pressures:** Research has established a relationship between media ownership and funding. Media organizations are often profit-driven entities, and their ownership structures can influence the type of reporting that is produced. Owners may have political or financial interests that shape the editorial stance of the media outlet. McQuail (2010) postulates that media contents always reflect the interests of those who fund them and to give credence to this, a research study was conducted by Nwanyanwu (2009) on the constraints of journalistic practice in government-owned media organisations in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria found out that government officials and agents interfere with state-owned media operations, as such they are made to protect government interests at all times (Dogari, Shem & Apuke,2018, p.232).
2. **Journalists' Bias:** Journalists, like all individuals, have their own beliefs, values, and biases. These beliefs can influence the way they select stories, frame issues, and interview sources., as Pate (2002) cited in Omebije Abdulhasir & Maichiki (2023, p.9) remarked that "nothing defines the character of the media establishment more sharply than any crisis that pitches nation against nation or one section of society against another. In times of conflict the responsibility of the media is magnified ten folds by society

demand for more news information and analysis, and therefore its increased capacity to inform, debate and shape public opinion. Every opinion written or spoken by the media is a potential machete, bullet or bomb in the hands and mind of victims and perpetrators".

3. **Political Pressures:** Journalists may face pressure from political groups that seek to shape media narratives in their favor. This may lead journalists to self-censor or tailor their reporting to align with the viewpoints of powerful interest groups. An example of the pressure journalists/media face from the political arena was evident in 1984, precisely February at a press conference where the then military regime headed by General Buhari lashed out at the press and threatened to tamper with the press freedoms enshrined in the 1979 constitution over articles in the press which had claimed that 2.8 million naira had been found missing in the oil ministry which he headed (Seng & Hunt, 1986, p.95).
4. **Competition and Ratings:** If competition affects media bias, competition can also affect media performance via media bias, Wellbrock & Kure (2020, p.6159). In a highly competitive media environment, where audience ratings and clicks are paramount, there is a tendency to prioritize stories that are attention-grabbing or controversial, even if they are not fully balanced or represent the issue at hand.
5. **Pressure to Meet Deadlines:** In the fast-paced world of journalism, pressure to meet deadlines and produce content rapidly can sometimes lead to shortcuts in fact-checking and verification, which in turn can lead to biased or inaccurate reporting. The lack of time according to Harro-Loit & Josephi (2020) in Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets (2022) is one of the key factors that influence how information acquired by journalists affects their work practices.

Case Studies

This article brings forward two case studies on the agenda- setting and media framing reporting in the Nigerian context that has led to media bias.

Agenda-Setting Reporting

- The Niger Delta region has been the center of unrest due to disputes over oil revenue, environmental degradation, and political marginalization. Media coverage of the conflict has often been agenda setting as certain aspects of the conflict receive more attention while others are overlooked. In many instances, the Nigerian media has focused on the violent aspects of the conflict, portraying the militants as the main drivers of the crisis, while neglecting the underlying socio-economic and environmental issues that have contributed to the unrest. This biased agenda-setting has led to a skewed public perception of the conflict, with many

Nigerians viewing the militants as the sole instigators of the unrest. According to Amenaghawon (2016), "the choice of words that the media used in portraying the Niger Delta conflict had a great effect on how the people, the government, the international community, the oil companies etc., perceived the region".

- During political campaigns and elections, agenda setting by the media in Nigeria has contributed to bias through selective reporting and framing of political candidates and parties. In many instances, media outlets have been accused of favoring certain candidates or parties, thereby shaping public opinion in their favor while sidelining opposing viewpoints as Adebanwi (2016) notes in Demarest & Langer (2019, p.86) that "despite the heroic efforts of the press in ensuring the restoration of democratic rule and its critical role in monitoring democratically elected officials and institutions, on a few critical occasions, the Nigerian press renders itself totally captive to ethno-regional and ethno-religious passions and calculations".

These case studies illustrate how agenda-setting reporting in Nigeria has shaped public perception and influenced attitudes towards critical issues such as conflict, ethnicity, and politics. It underscores the importance of balanced and objective reporting to ensure that the media fulfills its role as a watchdog and facilitator of informed public discourse.

Media Framing and Reporting

Media framing and reporting in Nigeria has been observed in various forms, including political, economic, and social issues. These biases influence the way stories are presented, the perspectives that are highlighted, and the voices that are amplified in the media. Social issues, including matters related to gender, ethnicity, and religion suffer from media bias in Nigeria. Stories about social issues are often framed in a way that reflects prevailing societal attitudes and stereotypes, leading to the perpetuation of harmful narratives and the marginalization of certain groups.

- One study is the farmer-herder crisis in Nigeria. Studies have shown that although there are two actors - farmers and herders, herdsmen are more negatively framed and labeled than farmers in the media. Generic labeling and episodic framing of herdsmen as killers, attackers, violent invaders and rapists (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017; Ciboh, 2017; Igwebuike, 2020; Kolawole, 2021; Nwachukwu et al., 2021; Nwankwo, 2021) are frames capable of inducing fears in people whenever they come in contact with a herder, whether he is a Fulani or he is from other ethnic affiliation. In another instance, the media succeeded in framing farmers as innocent and defenseless (Gever & Essien, 2019; Igwebuike, 2020), cited in (Ajetunmobi 2023, p.95).

- Another study conducted by Ajetunmobi (2023) on Independent People of Biafra's Call for Biafran Republic found out that one voice which comes from the government through newspapers' reports demonizes IPOB as "armed agitators, abductors, murderers, terrorists, criminal agitators, militants, and separatists" (Akanni & Ibraheem, 2018; Chiluwa, 2018; Ezu, 2019; Folayan et al., 2021; Jimoh & Abdul-Hameed, 2017; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2019). The study found that these negative labels raise the prominence of IPOB in manners that portray every member as an armed and criminal agitator even if only few of its members are criminals.

Influence of Social Media and Digital Platforms on Media Ethics

The social media are online platforms and websites that allow people to create and share content and even interact with others through messaging, sharing photos and videos. Some popular social media platforms include: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat among others. The social media has become an integral part of modern society, and has enabled people to stay connected, share information and even express themselves as Boyd &Ellison (2008) defines social media as a website that gives the audience the opportunity to share profiles and create visible relationships among fellow users" cited in Gbadeyan (2021, p.390).

According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), "Social media is a honeycomb of seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups", while Kapoor et al. (2018) says "social media is made up of various user-driven platforms that facilitate diffusion of compelling content, dialogue creation, and communication to a broader audience. It is essentially a digital space created by the people and for the people, and it provides an environment that is conducive for interactions and networking to occur at different levels (for instance, personal, professional, business, marketing, political, and societal)" both cited in (Aichner, Grunfelder, Maurer & Jegeni, 2021).

Arising from the social media is citizen journalism which has undeniably transformed the media landscape, allowing individuals to report, analyze, and disseminate news and information in ways that were once the exclusive domain of professional journalists and traditional media organisations. One of the key criticisms leveled against citizen journalism is that it can sometimes lead to the debasement of conventional journalism because anyone with an internet connection and a smartphone can now act as a reporter, analyst or even a news anchor, reaching potentially massive audiences with their content. This proliferation of unvetted, unverified, and sometimes biased information has led to a dilution of the standards and practices that have traditionally governed professional journalism. Banjo & Jiboku (,2023) in Banjo & Oduwobi (2023) adduces that the fundamental norms that guide journalism practice

around the world are the ethical principles in journalism. They are the basis around which the journalism profession is built and without their application to the news-gathering and producing process, the profession will collapse".

The alarming proliferation of fabricated news, falsehoods, hate speech, and other unethical activities represents the central ethical challenges in Nigerian journalism and the influence of social media and digital platforms on media ethics is both positive and negative. On one hand, it has increased transparency, accountability, and audience participation, on the other, it has introduced new challenges such as the spread of misinformation and the erosion of traditional ethical standards.

Media Ethics in Countering Biased Reporting

Journalists must adhere to principles of fairness, accuracy, balance, and integrity in their reporting to counter biased reporting and media ethics play a crucial role in achieving this. According to Christian (2012), "Journalists need to carefully examine their own cultural biases and the key for journalists is being aware of what contributes to one's own biases. Learning about one's own biases is essential to truly accurate journalism".

Blackwell, (2013, p.55) quotes Martin Bell (1997) of the BBC who notes that "a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; and will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor. This is not to back one side or faction or people against one another; it is to make the point that we are in the press, and especially television which is its most powerful division, do not stand apart from the world". Overcoming bias in reporting is crucial for maintaining the integrity and accuracy of news and information.

To address bias in reporting, journalists and news organizations can take several steps:

a. **Acknowledge and Understand Bias:** The first step in overcoming bias in reporting is to acknowledge its presence and understand its nature. By recognizing the existence of bias, journalists can begin to address it effectively.
b. **Diverse perspectives:** Media organizations should promote diverse perspectives and voices in their coverage. This means actively seeking out different viewpoints, and experiences to ensure balanced reporting.
c. **Implement Editorial Standards and Guidelines:** News organizations should establish clear editorial standards and guidelines to ensure fair and accurate reporting. These standards should emphasize the importance of neutrality, objectivity, and balance in news coverage.
d. **Encourage Critical Thinking and Fact-Checking:** Journalists should approach their reporting with critical thinking and skepticism. Fact-checking is a crucial part of the journalistic process, and it helps in verifying the accuracy of information and minimizing the impact of bias.

e. **Monitor and Review Reporting Practices:** News organizations should regularly monitor and review their reporting practices to identify and address bias. This can involve internal audits, reader feedback, and critical assessments of news coverage.
f. **Encourage Audience Engagement:** Engaging with audiences can provide valuable feedback on news coverage and help in identifying potential biases. News organizations can encourage audience participation through feedback mechanisms, reader surveys, and public forums.
g. **Hold Journalists Accountable:** News organizations should hold journalists accountable for not adhering to ethical standards and addressing bias in their reporting. By fostering a culture of accountability, news organizations can reinforce the importance of unbiased reporting.
h. **Editorial independence:** Journalists should have the freedom to report without undue influence or pressure from external sources, including advertisers, owners, or political interests.

It is important to note that countering biased reporting requires the active engagement of journalists, media organizations, and the public.

Examples of Successful Media Accountability Initiatives in Nigeria

Nigeria has seen several successful media accountability initiatives emerge in recent years, aimed at ensuring journalists and media organizations adhere to professional standards and ethics.

One notable initiative is the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ), established in 2014. Now known as the center for journalism innovation and development (CJID), Premium Times (2022), it has played a pivotal role in promoting media accountability in Nigeria. One of the key successes of CJID is its fact-checking and verification project known as Dubawa. This initiative focuses on verifying and debunking misleading information, especially in the context of elections and political discourse. The investigation by the CJID into the Pandora Papers is one of the successes. The investigation by Premium Times uncovered a complex web of tax havens and offshore accounts that hide the true ownership of billions of dollars of assets. It revealed the covert dealings and hidden assets of over 330 politicians and high-level public officials in over ninety nations and territories, including thirty-five country leaders (Mwansat, 2022).

Furthermore, the Media Rights Agenda (MRA), a non-governmental organization, has been actively involved in advocating for press freedom and media accountability in Nigeria. MRA has been instrumental in challenging laws and policies that impede journalists' ability to operate freely and hold power to account. A 2021 law suit filed by the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) against the National Broadcasting Commission

for the fines they issued in the 2019 general elections finally yielded a positive result on May 10, 2023. In its decision a federal high court ruled in favour of MRA, declaring the fines unconstitutional. The court issued an order of perpetual injunction, restraining the commission from imposing further fines against the broadcast sector in Nigeria (Okonkwo, 2023).

Additionally, the Code of Ethics of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) has served as a guiding framework for promoting media accountability in the country. The NUJ's code outlines professional standards and ethical principles that journalists are expected to uphold in their reporting. By adhering to this code, journalists and media organizations can demonstrate their commitment to accuracy, fairness, and integrity in their work, thereby fostering greater trust and credibility with the public.

Ethical Challenges for Nigerian journalists

Ethics in journalism makes up the moral principles and values that guide journalists in their work and according to Nasidi (2016, p.4), the responsibility for serving the public rests squarely on individual reporters and their editors. Akinfeleye (2003) in Nasidi (2016, p.4) observes that the challenge facing journalists has less to do with the failure to abide by the ethics of the profession, but of doing a good job of informing and educating the Nigeria public. However there is a great damage done when the reporter or editor fails in his/her editorial judgements by publishing or reporting inaccurate news and to guide against this Risley (2001) cited in Nasidi (2016,p.4) says when a journalist is confronted with ethical problems he or she should consider the following principles: when there are two extreme positions in a situation, he or she should seek the middle ground known by Aristotle as the "Golden mean", act only as you would wish others would act, consider the utilitarianism of our actions, which means that a journalist's action is considered morally right if it produces the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people, taking into account the interests of all individuals affected by the action, apply the veil of ignorance by minimizing the impact of their own perspectives on the stories they cover and aim to provide a neutral and balanced account of the issues and events they report on and finally treat people in the same way they would expect to be treated.

Citing Dare (2010), Banjo & Oduwobi (2023) posits that "what appears on the newspaper's pages can be decided by politicians who have the funds to operate a media organization" exemplifying the adage that "he who pays the piper dictates the tone".

There are several ethical challenges that journalists in Nigeria face while performing their duties. Some of these challenges include:

1. **Press freedom:** Journalists in Nigeria often face restrictions on their freedom of expression and the right to report without censorship or interference. The government and powerful individuals can pressure or intimidate journalists to

suppress certain stories or narratives further adduced by Ibbi (2016, p.1) that "ownership and control play very strong roles in defining what becomes news in the country thus a well written story no matter how well investigated it may be may not see the light of the day if it continuously steps on the toes of the government in power or the rich in society who constitute those that place advertisements in the newspaper or broadcast organization". According to Ojo (2003).in Demarest & Langer (2019, p.88) Moshood Abiola, the winner of the aborted 1993 presidential elections, also saw the ownership of a newspaper as an important tool for a political leader.

2. **Threats and violence:** Nigeria ranked 123 out of 180 countries on the 2023 press freedom index of the Reporters without Borders. Though Nigeria improved six places over its previous ranking in 2022, Reporters Without Borders affirmed that "Nigeria is one of West Africa's most dangerous countries for journalists who are often monitored, attacked and arbitrarily arrested as was the case during the 2023 elections". In Demarest & Langer (2019, p.88) Freedom House (2016) confirmed that press media and journalists also face harassment and violence from disgruntled politicians and their supporters. Journalists in Nigeria are frequently subjected to intimidation, threats, or physical attacks, especially when investigating sensitive issues such as corruption, human rights abuses, or political scandals. Some even lose their lives in the course of carrying out their duties.
3. **Corruption:** Nigeria ranks poorly in global corruption indices and it is the 150 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries. According to the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International, journalists often face challenges when reporting on corruption scandals involving influential individuals or government officials. They may encounter bribery giving rise to the brown envelope syndrome and subtle coercion. Ibbi (2016, p.4) postulates that the Nigerian journalist deals on a daily basis with strong tempting reasons to encourage this unethical practice. Some of these reasons include: poor remuneration, nonpayment of salaries as and when due, pressure from friends and families through comparison and the economic situation of the country.
4. **Bias and objectivity:** Maintaining objectivity and impartiality can be challenging for journalists in Nigeria, especially when there are significant political or tribal divides. Balancing reporting perspectives while avoiding favoritism or polarizing narratives can be an ethical tightrope for journalists. According to Demarest & Langer (2019, p.89) "political influences have also arisen during election times. This has already been shown for media coverage of parties and candidates. While the Electoral Act requires equal media coverage for all political parties, there is generally an incumbent advantage in

coverage" In the run-up to the 2011 elections, for instance, about forty broadcasting stations were fined for violating the Electoral Act (NDI 2011). Government-owned media clearly represented the incumbent party in a favorable light, but even private media gave greatest coverage to the ruling party. The same patterns were observable in the run-up to the 2015 elections (EU election observer mission 2015) as cited by Demarest & Langer (2019, p.89).

5. **Financial Challenges:** Many Nigerian media organizations struggle to sustain themselves due to limited resources, low revenue generation, and a weak advertising market. Journalists may face ethical questions regarding accepting gifts, sponsorships, or engaging in practices that compromise their independence or integrity especially with poor pay packages in countries like Nigeria and that is if the salaries ever come in time notes (Ibbi,2016).

The Role of Government and Regulatory Bodies

Nigeria, like many other countries, grapples with the challenge of balancing press freedom with the need for ethical standards in the media industry. The government and regulatory bodies have a responsibility to create an environment that promotes ethical journalism and holds media organizations accountable for their actions.

a. The government plays a key role in establishing a legal framework that upholds media ethics. This includes enacting laws that protect press freedom while also outlining the responsibilities and ethical guidelines for media professionals. Such laws should also hold media organizations accountable for unethical practices, such as libel, misinformation, and invasion of privacy. Article 39 of the Nigerian Constitution guarantees press freedom, a cornerstone of responsible journalism and the balancing Act in the constitution is formulated to give Freedom of Expression subject only to the laws of the country such as libel, slander, injurious falsehood etc. Despite the constitutional provision, limitations on press freedom exist to prevent abuse and safeguard other rights (Okoro, 2004, p.147).
b. Regulatory bodies, such as the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), formed by the Nigerian Press Council Act No.85 of 1992 (as amended in Act 60 of 1999) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the NBC Act are responsible for overseeing the media industry and ensuring that ethical standards are upheld. These bodies play a critical role in setting and enforcing codes of conduct for journalists and media organisation. Olagoke, Olatunji & Najeem (2021, p.35). By establishing guidelines for fair and accurate reporting, protection of sources, and respect for privacy, regulatory bodies can help foster a culture of ethics within the media.

c. Government and regulatory agencies also have a role in promoting professionalism and ethical training within the media industry. Nigerian academic institutions, media organisations are contributing to the process of training media professionals, examples of such are the TV College, Jos, the Nigerian Institute of Journalism and the Radio Nigeria Training School, Lagos (Rauf, Ojo, Akinreti, Odegbenle, Jegede & Nwaolikpe 2013, p.12). They can and are supporting initiatives aimed at training journalists on ethical reporting, fact-checking, and responsible use of media.
d. In addition to setting ethical guidelines, the government and regulatory bodies must also create mechanisms for accountability and redress. This includes establishing avenues for the public to lodge complaints against media organizations for ethical violations. To provide the public with an independent forum for resolving complaints about the press, the office of the Ombudsman was established by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association of Nigeria (NPAN) to offer speedy, satisfactory solutions to many of the complaints launched by the Nigerian public on ethical infractions by journalists. (Onayinka, 2015, p.56).

It is essential that this oversight is carried out in a manner that respects and upholds press freedom. Heavy-handed regulation and censorship can stifle freedom of expression and limit the ability of journalists to hold those in power accountable, therefore, the balance between regulation and freedom is crucial in fostering ethical media practices.

Conclusion

The impact of biased reporting in Nigeria clearly underscores the ongoing importance of media ethics in shaping public perception. This critical examination has revealed the profound influence that biased reporting can have on public attitudes, social cohesion, and political stability. By perpetuating misinformation, inflaming tensions, and breeding distrust, biased reporting threatens to undermine the foundations of a healthy and robust society.

There is the urgent need for media professionals, regulatory bodies, and civil society organizations to uphold and promote ethical standards in journalism. It is imperative that media professionals adhere to principles of accuracy, fairness, balance, and independence in their reporting, as these ethical standards are essential for cultivating an informed and engaged public.

Moreover, this also serves as a call to action for policymakers and stakeholders to foster an environment conducive to ethical journalism. Ensuring press freedom, supporting media literacy initiatives, and establishing robust regulatory mechanisms are key steps toward mitigating the detrimental effects of biased reporting and enhancing the quality of public discourse.

Recommendations for Promoting Media Ethics and Combating Biased Reporting in Nigeria

Promoting media ethics and combating biased reporting in Nigeria will require collaboration between media organizations, regulatory bodies, civil society, and the government. Here are some recommendations for addressing these issues:

1. **Media Literacy Programs:** Introduce media literacy programs in schools and communities to educate citizens about identifying biased reporting, understanding media ethics, and critically evaluating news sources.
2. **Capacity Building for Journalists:** Provide training and capacity building programs for journalists and media professionals on ethical reporting practices, conflict-sensitive journalism, and professional standards. This can be done through partnerships with international organizations, media institutions, and press associations.
3. **Strengthening Regulatory Framework:** Strengthen the regulatory framework for media in Nigeria to ensure that there are clear guidelines and consequences for unethical journalism and biased reporting. This may involve reviewing and updating existing media laws and regulations to align with international best practices.
4. **Encourage Self-Regulation:** Encourage media organizations to develop and adhere to their own codes of ethics and standards of practice. Industry-led initiatives can promote self-regulation and accountability within the media sector.
5. **Engage Civil Society Organizations:** Partner with civil society organizations and media watchdog groups to monitor and report on instances of biased reporting and ethical breaches. This collaboration can help hold media organizations accountable and raise awareness about media ethics issues.
6. **Collaboration with International Partners:** More Collaborations with international organizations, media development agencies, and foreign governments to share best practices, technical assistance, and support for promoting media ethics in Nigeria should be encouraged.

These recommendations, if implemented in a coordinated and sustained manner, can contribute to promoting media ethics and combating biased reporting in Nigeria. It is important to recognize that addressing these issues will require long-term commitment and collaboration among various stakeholders to create a media environment that is conducive to ethical and unbiased journalism.

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