



Ethical Standards of Fairness and Objectivity and Journalism Practice in Nigeria: Views from Anambra State

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Abstract

The study entitled Ethical Standards of Fairness and Objectivity and Journalism Practice in Nigeria: Views from Anambra State was aimed at determining the extent of observance of ethical principles among practicing journalists in Nigeria. The survey of 206 media workers, teachers and postgraduate students of mass communication purposively drawn from Anambra State, used the questionnaire and interview in data collection, and adopted the percentage method in data analysis. Findings reveal that most journalists in Nigeria observe journalistic ethics of fairness and objectivity in their professional practice. Findings however show that observance of ethical standards by journalists was not at all times. Finding further shows that privately owned media workers were more forthright in observing ethical principles of fairness and objectivity (particularly in political electioneering campaign reports) than government-owned media workers. The researchers recommended that all journalists should endeavour to observe the code of professional ethics in the discharge of their professional duties for better journalism practice in Nigeria.

Key words: Ethics, Standards, Fairness, Objectivity, Journalism, Practice, Nigeria.

Introduction and Justification for the Study

Objectivity and fairness are cardinal elements in journalistic codes of standards the world over. Journalism ethics and standards consist of principles or ethics and good practice as applicable to the challenge faced by journalists. These media ethics are known to journalists as their professional code of ethics or canons of journalism (American Society of News Editors, ASNE, 1975). The ethical code guide journalists in the

conduct of their professional duties and represents the yardstick for judging the professional conduct of journalists in their day - to - day operations.

Elements of journalistic ethics as contained in most canons of journalism are many but the most common, basic and universal of them are the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, and public accountability, particularly as they relate to the acquisition of news-worthy information and dissemination to the



public (Society of Professional Journalists, SPJ, 2014; ASNE, 1975; International Federation of Journalists, IFJ, 1954). Journalistic code of ethics or canons of journalism are so important in media operations because they provide media workers with a framework for self-monitoring and self-correction.

The media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm and the Watchdog of the society are laden with vital duties such as exposing of personal scandals, financial wrongdoing, political corruption, self-enrichment in public office and other types of wrongdoing for the good of the society. The media perform these and other related functions guided by the principles of objectivity and fairness as contained in the canons of journalism.

Objectivity refers to a standard that promotes truth, defined as a correspondence, grounded in correctness, between thought and reality. Journalistic objectivity refers to fairness, disinterestedness, factuality, and non-partisanship. Clark (2014) avers that the maintenance of objectivity in journalism requires that journalists need to present the facts whether or not they like or agree with those facts. Thus, objective journalism needs to remain neutral and unbiased at all times regardless of the writer's opinion or personal beliefs (Clark, 2014). According to Bovee (1999) journalistic objectivity requires that a journalist should not be on either side of an argument. The implication of this is that the journalist must report only the facts, not his/her personal attitude toward the facts.

In his own contribution, sociologist Michael Schudson contends that the belief in objectivity is a faith in facts, a distrust in values and a

commitment to their segregation (Schudson, 1978). Objectivity pervades the entire institutional duties of journalists in their efforts to gather and disseminate news. Thus, it also implies an institutional role for journalists as a fourth estate, a body that exists apart from government and large interest groups (Schudson, 1978).

Notwithstanding that the concepts of objectivity and fairness in media practice have been roundly criticised by many scholars, particularly media experts, they still remain the hallmarks of ethical journalism practice the world over. An objective journalist demonstrates faith in fairness, truthfulness, accuracy, balance and impartiality. The code of ethics for Nigerian journalists states clearly in its preamble that "Truth is the corner stone of journalism and every journalist should strive diligently to ascertain the truth of every event." The code goes on to state that every journalist in Nigeria should observe accuracy and fairness (among others) in his/her professional conduct. Specifically, the code asserts that factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence. The code urges journalists to refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information. Thus, the Nigerian code for journalistic practice adequately provides for objective and fair reporting in media work in Nigeria. It is therefore expected that all journalists in Nigeria, irrespective of the section they belong to, should faithfully observe these ethics enshrined in the canons of journalism.

Unfortunately, without fear of contradiction, one cannot say, that all journalists in Nigeria observe the



standards of ethics of journalism at all times particularly as they relate to fairness and objectivity. No one is sure of the section of the Nigerian media (the public or private) that is keener or more forthright in fair and objective journalism. The extent of observance of the ethical principles of fairness and objectivity in media work in Nigeria as it relates to the two sections of the media has not been empirically ascertained. Thus, the key question motivating this study was: What is the extent of observance of the ethical standards of objectivity and fairness among Nigerian journalists?

Objectives of the Study

The basic objective of this study was to determine Nigerian Journalist's level of observance of fairness and objectivity in their media work. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Determine the extent of observance of the standard of objectivity and fairness among Nigeria Journalists
- Ascertain the section of the media in Nigeria that is more objective and fair in its daily report.
- Access factors that hinder objectivity and fairness in media operations in Nigeria.
- Proffer solutions to the observed/identified hindrances to media objectivity and fairness in Nigeria.

Research Questions

Pursuant to the identified objectives of the study, the following questions were posed to guide the conduct of the study.

1. What is the extent of observance of the ethical standards of objectivity and fairness among Nigerian journalists?
2. Which section of the media in Nigeria is more objective and fair in its daily reports?
3. What factors hinder objectivity and fairness in media operations in Nigeria?
4. What are the solutions to observed hindrances to media objectivity and fairness in Nigeria?

Method

As noted by Matseketsa and Mapolisa (2013), cited in Edegoh, Ezech and Samson (2015, p. 65) "Research methodology refers to the ways in which a researcher retrieves data from the selected sampling frame, methods for collecting data, instruments to be used and how the data is scrutinised and presented." Leedy and Ormrod (2010), cited in Edegoh et al (2015, p.65) refer to it as "the framework for extracting meaning from the data collected." This study adopted the survey research method.

The survey is an excellent method for the measurement of attitude and opinion of people within a large population (Babbie, 2010). It is a study of the characteristics of a sample through questioning, which enables a researcher to make generalisations concerning his population of interest (Ohaja, 2003, cited in Asemah, Nwammuo and Edegoh, 2014). The population of registered journalists in Anambra State is 300 plus. The sample size for this study was 206 media workers, teachers and postgraduate students of mass



communication purposively drawn from public and private media outfits across the state and from the two government owned universities in the state, namely: the Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka and the Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Igbariam campus. Two hundred and two (202) were issued the questionnaire while four (4) were interviewed. The reason for purposive sampling was to ensure that participants in the study meet certain criteria which the researchers view as critical for effective participation in the study.

The choice of 206 respondents as the sample size for the study was informed by Comrey and Lee's (1992) guidelines, cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2006, p.101): "One guideline recommended for multivariate studies is as follows: 50 = very poor; 100 = poor; 200 = fair; 300 = good; 500 = very good; and 1000 = excellent." As noted by Nwana, cited in Edegoh et al (2015, p.65)

"If the population is a few hundreds, a 40% or more sample will do; if many hundreds, a 20% sample will do; if a few thousands, a 10% sample will do; and if several thousands, a 5% or less will do."

The study made use of multi-choice, close-ended questionnaire as well as the interview technique to generate data. The questionnaire which was issued to 202 media workers and postgraduate students of mass communication contained two sections. Section A consisted of five items designed to generate data on respondents' demographics while section B, comprised of 12 items designed to obtain data to answer the research questions. Also, interview was conducted with four (4) lecturers of mass communication on the subject matter of inquiry to augment data generated through the questionnaire. The percentage method and table of frequency were used as tools for data analysis.

Results

Table 1: Return Rate of the Questionnaire

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Returned and found usable	200	99
Not usable	2	1
Not returned	Nil	0
Total	202	100

Table 1 shows that the return rate of the questionnaire was 99% (n = 200) while the mortality rate was only 1% (n = 2). The return rate is higher than the mortality rate. The mortality rate of 1% does not affect the study because it is insignificant compared with the return rate of 99%. Thus the copies were

considered adequate to represent the population. The presentation and analysis, of data obtained from the questionnaire was based on the 200 copies that were returned and found usable. Also, the data obtained through the interview were subsumed in the discussion of findings.



Table 2: Sex of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	120	60
Female	80	40
Total	200	100

Table 2 contains data on sex distribution of respondents in the study. The majority of participants were males (60% or $n = 120$) while 40% ($n = 80$) were females. The reason for this disparity is because more males practice journalism in Anambra State.

Table 3: Marital Status

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Married	130	65
Single	70	35
Total	200	100

Table 3 shows data on marital status of the participants. Sixty-five percent of them were married ($n = 130$) and 35% were single ($n = 70$). The majority of respondents in the study were married.

Table 4: Age of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
21-30	44	22
31-40	80	40
41 years and above	76	38
Total	200	100

Data on respondents' age as contained in table 4 above reveal that majority of the respondents were aged 31-40 years ($n=80$ or 40%), and 41 years and above ($n = 76$ or 38%). However, 22% ($n = 44$) respondents were within the age bracket of 21-30 years.

Table 5: Occupation of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Media workers	140	70
Students	60	30
Total	200	100



Distribution of respondents according to their occupation reveal that media workers were the majority with 70% (n = 140) while students were 30% (n = 60).

Table 6: Institutional Affiliation of Respondents

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Public media	70	35
Private media	70	35
NAU students	30	15
COOU students	30	15
Total	200	100

Table 6 contains data on institutional affiliation of participants in the study. Respondents affiliated to both public and private media were 70% (or n = 140) while students from both NAU and COOU were 30% (or n = 70). Media workers were than students who participated in the study.

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question One

What is the extent of observance of the ethical standards of objectivity and fairness among Nigerian journalists?

Table 7: Respondents' response on whether Nigerian journalists demonstrate objectivity and fairness

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	162	81
No	34	17
Don't know	4	2
Total	200	100

Data in table 7 were obtained to establish whether Nigerian journalists demonstrate objectivity and fairness in their daily reports. As could be gleaned from the table, 81% (n = 162) of participants in the study said "yes" while 17% (n = 34) disagreed by indicating "no". However, 2% (n = 4) returned the "Don't know" response verdict. The implication therefore is that majority of the participants believe that Nigerian journalists are fair and objective in their daily reports.

Table 8: Responses on whether journalists demonstrate objectivity and fairness at all times

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	96	48
No	100	50
Don't know	4	2
Total	200	100



Table 8 contains data obtained to establish whether Nigerian journalists display objectivity and fairness in their professional duties at all times. Majority of participants were of the view that Nigerian journalists do not show objectivity and fairness in their work at all times (n = 100, or 50%). However, 48% (n = 96) claimed that journalists in Nigeria demonstrate fairness and objectivity always while 2% (or n = 4)

Research Question Two

Which section of the media in Nigeria is more objective and fair in its daily reports?

Table 9: The section of the media that is more objective and fair

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
Public media	80	40
Private Media	120	60
Total	200	100

Data in table 9 were obtained to answer research question two that sought to establish the section of Nigerian media that is more objective and fair in its daily reports. Evidence from table 9 indicates that the private media are more objective and fair in their daily reports. This view was held by 60% (n = 120) respondents.

Research Question three

What factors hinder objectivity and fairness in media report in Nigeria?

Table 10: Hindrances to media objectivity and fairness

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Government ownership and control of the media	102	51
Censorship	20	10
Fear of harassment	10	5
Lack of courage	30	15
Influence of Advertisers	10	5
Non-commitment	18	9
Others	10	5
Total	200	100

respondents chose the “Don’t know” response option.

The plausible deduction to be made from data on research question one is that Nigerian journalists are adjudged to be fair and objective in the discharge of their professional duties but not at all times.

The public or government media followed with 40% (n = 80). By inference, data in table 9 support the position that the media owned by private individuals and organisations in Nigeria are more forthright in demonstrating objectivity and fairness in their daily media reports than government or public media.



Table 10 contains data obtained to identify hindrances to media objectivity and fairness in Nigeria. As could be seen from the table, the greatest of these hindrances is government ownership and direct control of the media (51%, n = 102), other factors include lack of courage on the part of the journalists (15%, n=30), government censorship (10%, n= 20), non-commitment by journalist (9%, n = 18), and so forth. It is

therefore clear that participants in the study considered government ownership and control of the mass media as the greatest factor militating against media objectivity and fairness in Nigeria.

Research Question Four

What are the solutions to observed/identified hindrances to media objectivity and fairness in Nigeria?

Table 11: Solutions to Militating Factors

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Professionalisation of the media	60	30
Non-government control	48	24
Freedom of the press	24	12
Training and retraining of journalist	34	17
Courage and fearlessness	18	9
Professional commitment	12	6
Others	4	2
Total	200	100

Data in table 11 were obtained to proffer solutions to the observed factors that hinder objectivity and fairness in media operations in Nigeria. The table shows that majority of the respondent's believed that professionalisation of all aspects and sectors of the media in Nigeria will provide the much needed remedy (30%, n = 60). Other factors identified by participants include non-government control (24%, n = 48), training and retraining of journalists (17%, n = 34), freedom of the press (12%, n = 24), courage and fearlessness (6%, n = 12), among others.

We deduce from data on research question four that the remedies to the factors hindering objectivity and fairness in media work in Nigeria lies in professionalisation of the media, non-

government control of the media and training and retraining of journalists to keep them abreast of current global best practices, and so forth.

Discussion

Findings of this study are both interesting and revealing. First and foremost, the researchers found that most journalists in Nigeria observe the ethical standards of fairness and objectivity in their professional practice. Data from both the interview and the questionnaire supported this position. This means that in their day-to-day professional conduct, most Nigerian journalists display objectivity and fairness. Findings, however, indicate that not all journalists in Nigeria demonstrate fairness and objectivity in their media operations at all times.



Findings of the study also show that the privately owned media workers in Nigeria were more forthright in observing ethical principles of fairness and objectivity than government owned media workers. The privately owned media present almost all their reports as objectively and fairly as they could no matter who is involved. The public or government media reflect objectivity and fairness in their report only when such reports favour the government (or when such reports do not embarrass the powers that be). Most state-owned media in Nigeria (that is, radio, television and newspapers owned by state governments in Nigeria) show less objectivity and fairness in reports that do not favour their owners.

Findings indicate that the major factors that hinder fair and objective journalism in Nigeria include government ownership and control of the media which makes it possible for government officials to hire and fire key officers of the media organisation they own, lack of courage on the part of the journalists, government censorship of what is to be published (especially among media owned by the government), and non-commitment, among many factors. This position was supported more by data from the questionnaire. The saying that "He who pays the piper dictates the tune" is true of the relationship between media workers in government owned media establishments and their employers. This is because most state government see their media outfits as extended organs of government that should be used to run down their opponents and mount media propaganda to keep the led in line as a way to cover corrupt administration.

On the study's fourth and last objective which sought to proffer solutions to the hindrances identified, the researchers found from data from both the interview and the questionnaire that remedies to the identified problems lie in professionalisation of all aspects, sectors and sections of the media in Nigeria, non-government control, training and retraining of journalists and press freedom among so many others. This implies that the media professionals should be allowed free hand to run the affairs of media organisations, particularly those owned by the states in Nigeria. It also means that professionals should be allowed to take decisions regarding key issues in such organisations including decisions of what is to be published. When professionals manage media organisations professionally, the much needed ethical standards of fairness and objectivity would be realised.

Conclusion

This paper examined ethical standards of fairness and objectivity and journalism practice in Nigeria, drawing views from Anambra State. The rationale behind the study was to determine the extent of observance of the ethical standards of objectivity and fairness among Nigerian journalists and to ascertain the section of the Nigerian media that is more objective and fair in their daily reports. From the data presented, the researchers found that most journalists in Nigeria observe journalistic ethics of fairness and objectivity in their professional practice but they do not observe these ethical principles at all times. The study further indicates that media workers with private media establishments were more forthright in observing the standards of



objectivity and fairness than their counterparts in public or government media. We therefore conclude that journalists in Nigeria demonstrates the cherished ethical standards of fairness and objectivity in the discharge of their professional responsibilities but not at all times, and that the privately-owned media perform much better than government or public media in demonstrating fairness and objectivity in their daily reports.

Recommendations

Following the conclusion of this study and the findings made, we advance the following recommendations.

- i. All media workers (journalists) in Nigeria should endeavour to observe the code of journalistic ethics in the discharge of their professional duties for better journalism practice in Nigeria.
- ii. Professionalisation of public or government media organisations in Nigeria is recommended. This will make it possible for professionals who will manage those media outfits in line with the principles of fairness and objectivity to be in charge.
- iii. Practicing journalists should be retrained to enable them be abreast of current best global media practices.

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