

Media and Ethical Issues in Photo-Journalism

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Abstract

The media profession is characterized by entrants of untrained personnel or trained personnel who are not really educated. This crop of vocationally low esteemed persons, who have radically burrowed themselves into the fabrics of this noble profession, have continued to constitute aberration to the profession and bastardized the image of practitioners. Such 'journalists' who should conduct themselves as watch dogs of society, have ironically not only availed themselves as instruments for compromising professional standard, but have also exacerbated societal problems by using their pen to deepen disunity. What could have been responsible for this irony? Are there no existing laws in the profession that impel every member to obedience? This paper contends that there are, but outright disregard for these ethics, either because of poor education, interest or sentiments must have been responsible for the abuse. Through exploration of contents (corpus) material, the writers provide a subtitle definition to media, ethics and photo-journalism where abuses are glaring in areas such as portrayal of violence and photo manipulation. The specifically highlight political and economic manipulation of the media as bane of society. The writers suggest among other things that journalists should go back to the drawing board and observe their professional ethics in order to bring back the required sanity.

Keywords: Media, Ethics, Photo-journalism, violence

1.1 Introduction

In media practice, professional journalists play the role of gathering, analyzing and disseminating news and information about people, events and issues in society. The message or information could be in form of news, commentaries, editorials, advertorials, news analysis, profiles, columns, cartoons, pictures or magazine feature. These are disseminated in media of mass communication such as radio, television news papers, magazine, digital TV, face book, you tube, 2go and other numerous social media to a heterogeneous audience simultaneously or about the same time (Ogunkwo 1999).

The enormity and significance of this role imposes on journalists across the globe the need to be objective to ensure the survival and blossoming of the profession as well as retain the integrity of the profession and its practitioners. This calls for strict observance of professional ethics or codes of conduct by professionals. The ethics are the moral guide for practitioners to be truthful, objective and balanced (unbiased) in their practice to be able to positively affect the profession and society in which they practice.

Observance of ethics generally requires professionals to carry out their legitimate functions, enjoying all the rights and privileges bestowed on them by society to which their employers and subscribers also belong. It is through the observance of ethics that the moral carnal of society are appreciated and conserved, which distinguishes one society from another and human life from animal instinctive behaviours. As such, every professional organization is under obligation to operate within the ambit of prescribed ethics so as to be adjudged a bonifade member of the organization enjoying all the privileges of the organization. This paper explores the media and some ethical issue in photojournalism and advises practitioners not to renege upon ethics by manipulating or circumventing them, by way of allowing interest/sentiment skew them off the course of truthfulness, balance and objectivity.

2.0 Conceptual explication of the media, ethics and photojournalism

Mass media are a forum through which public opinions are openly expressed, and are therefore, generally accessible. The news papers and magazines, journals, radio, TV and films are typologies of the traditional mass media.

According to Noelle-Newmann (1993:149), "Journalists are able to report what they, from their consciousness, are able to perceive; the reader can only complete and explain the world by making use of consciousness which in large measure has been created by the mass media." This means the mass media communicators or journalists set agenda by refocusing public thinking and opinion, and by implication, action.

Mass communication is the process of transmitting messages to as many people as possible (mass) at about the same time to keep them abreast of the goings-on (happenings) in a society that is ever increasing in complexity.

The nature of messages transmitted is quite interesting for they are always in mass. This points to another aim of mass communication which is to reach as many people as possible with as much information as is available at all transmission times. This implies that the audience is always bombarded with messages of all sorts (that are significant) from virtually every subject at a single exposure.

The mass media are split into print and broadcast. Newspapers, magazines, journals and fax are examples of traditional print media. Messages printed or published in them get to audience differently but at nearly the same time. The audience (readers) of printed materials read them at different speeds and preserved material for further reference. This is not so with broadcast media: radio, TV, internet facilities (electronic media) etc. this genre involves a simultaneous transmission of information, ideas, knowledge, belief etc to a dispersed and heterogeneous audience through an electro-magnetic spectrum or air waves. Radio disseminates audio signals, while television transmits audio-visuals signals through similar process. (Agbanu and Nwamuo 2009:18). Generally, the message or information is transient is not easily preserveable (except where the audience has the capacity to record the message at the time of its transmission).

Thus, the definition of the media can be summed up “the media in all parts of the world are mad of electronic (radio and TV) and print (newspapers, periodicals-magazines etc.” (Sannie 2009:251).

Sannie further explains the role the media play in society, “They are established to inform, educate, entertain etc.” In performing these functions, the media are expected to be unbiased umpire, serving as watch dogs, surveilling the environment.

Ethics as a concept, on the other hand relates to morality. This implies that ethical behaviour is that which is good. The Wikipedia (2004) states that: ‘the formal study of ethics in a serious and analytical sense began with early Greeks and later Romans. Important Greek ethicists include the Sophists; Socrates and Aristotle who developed ethical, naturalism. The study of ethics was further developed by Epicures and the Epicurean movement and by Zeno and Strics.

Odumou (2009) identifies three theories or principles put forward to describe or prescribed ethical behavior. The first is deontological theory of ethics which states that judging an action as morally right or wrong should not depend on the consequences of the action, but purely on the principles of good or bad, right or wrong. The application of this theory to journalism profession is that journalism recognizes that conducts such as sycophancy and acceptance of brown envelopes (gratification) are wrong, whether the consequences of such actions are beneficial to the practitioners or not. Other theories of ethics exist but they are not relevant to this discussion and I beg to avoid them.

Virtues that the society preserves in pursuits of its moral rectitude, according to Orumu (2009:34) include friendship, love and honesty, justice, courage, self-control, helpfulness, bravery, and so on. Conversely, moral sharpens people’s dislike for and helps them to avoid vices such as cheating, treachery, theft, selfishness, dishonesty and greed.

Since the media are a part of the larger society and vanguard in the crusade for a virile peaceful and prosperous society, it behooves them to step up surveillance to minimize such vices including corruption, embezzlement and terrorism. Unfortunately, however, Orumu (2009:3) states: “the press have become part and parcel of the ills and are guilty of the offences they are supposed to guard against. Because media practitioners run afoul of morals, the profession not only suffers, but the entire society over which the media serve as a watch dog experiences ... decay.”

Besides, some journalists are scrupulously honest at avoiding vices or anything that would mar the profession or their personal dignity. Yet they fall victim of irrational ethical issues inadvertently. For instance, the decision about how much to cover, whether to cover or not to cover teenage suicide, is a Herculean task for journalists which boil down to ethics. Editors would argue that decisions to publicize such events could influence people far beyond individual media markets. It is this dilemma that media practitioners find themselves at the course of carrying out their legitimate functions and the desire to explore solutions to it that constitutes the motivation for this research.

Photojournalism is communication through pictures. It is the use of photographs in the narration, description and explanation of what has happened, is happening or about to happen. (Nwanyelugo and Nwadiukwu 2009:73). The definition of photojournalism can be made clearer if we try to differentiate it from photography. Photography is just the capturing of the aesthetic (beauty) of a thing, people or event/situation in a graphic form. But photojournalism judges a photograph not merely on its beauty but how well or effective that photograph/picture is to deliver a message in a graphic term.

Photojournalism is art for communication. “This implies that a photojournalist does more of the telling than a photographer. He must therefore, have a sense of news and what is important at any point in time. He must know what a news photograph should do for a publication, i.e. to arrest attention of viewers, tell the relevant story in proper perspective, and be relevant to the context of the story in every material particular.” (Nwanyelugo and Nwadiukwu 2009:74). The Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, further defines photojournalism as “a particular form of journalism that creates images in order to tell a news story. It is now usually understood to refer to only

still images, but in some cases the term also refers to video use.

3.0 Interface of photography and photojournalism

Photography can be considered as tap root of photojournalism but at what points do they coverage of diverge? Photography is the art of producing images on sensitized surfaces by the action of light. According to Webster's English dictionary, the word photography is derived from Greek word "photos" which means light, and "graphos" which means writing. So photography means writing with light. (Nwanyelugo and Nwadiukwu 2009:89). Technically speaking, according to them, photography is the making by optical chemical process with tools especially designed for the purpose of visual reproduction, a miniature of scenes which pas before the eye. Photojournalism on the other hand, according these scholars is photography with some icing or garnishing. It is photography because it makes use of photographic equipment such as camera or picture accessories. It however, goes beyond photography in that it demands a creative intelligence in photographing people, events and places. While the photographer operates more or less in "aware" or familiar zone, the photojournalist covers the "aware," "semi-aware" and "candid" domains with a sharp sense of news, information, education and entertainment. What makes a photographer different from a photojournalist is that a photographer takes picture of nouns (people, places, things), while photojournalist shoots actions or dynamic verbs (kicks, explodes, cries etc.). Where a photojournalist takes a picture of nouns then it must be a standard portrait (of people) or places, proposed zoning areas or construction sites, and these must seek to tell story in clear details.

4.0 Political and economic manipulation of the media

The media system the world over has become increasingly consumer driven and commercialized. Journalists frequently run programmes on campaign and elections or place stories on political activities, the ruling party or opposition. They bombard the public with the day's events on politics and governance. The near total dependence on political actors indicates the decline in reporting resources, laziness and shallow reportage among journalists. This trend forces media organizations to depend on materials produced directly by public relations fans, along with the information and stage with the performances produced by the professional communications consultants hired by parties, government agencies, politicians and election campaigns. According to Bernet (2000:10) communication professionals are also the first political priorities of news makers who understand (or have been lead to believe) that controlled and managed relations with journalists are necessary for political success.

He further observe that many of the scandalous, dramatic news in the US media in recent times were strategic communication campaigns aimed at using the news to elevate issues, a leader or a cause often while damaging the image and causes of opponents. For as long as these media dramas persist, news organizations often have business reasons to keep going, whether the issue in vogue is important or not or the waves of allegations and rumours are substantial.

But the thrust of the political economy of the media should be to enhance participatory democracy. For this reason, media and communication system should be seen as means to an end, with the end being social justice and human happiness. The media should be able to bring people together to struggle for social change, depoliticize people along ethnic, regional, religious or other lines of sentimentalism. This way, a virile and victorious society would evolve.

In Nigeria for instance, political frauds and criminals, public office holders who embezzle funds are not only glorified by society only; the media, the journalists became complacent in unearthing the root of these frauds especially where they have interest. This complacency ironically makes the media system to undermine democratic institution and practices rather than promote them, for everybody occupying public office regards it as family gold mine and exploits it with reckless abandon and no one checks them. This way, the media would be working for the oligarchs rather than be a force for justice and social transformation.

Specifically on the role of advertising and other media promotions, the history of the media in the US is replete with tragic hijacking by corporate interest, exploration of the insidious intertwining of corporate, political and media powers. It is also a fact that journalists, in pursuit of corporate profit, get involved in shoddy practices, there by undermining both the system and professional integrity of practitioners.

The critique of contemporary journalists is failure to serve as rigorous watchdogs against those abusing power, those who want to acquire power by all means and those who want to perpetuate themselves in power. They have relinquished their roles of sifting truth out of lies and shifted from adequately informing people about the exact things happening.

Furthermore, the prevailing business climates and stiff economic competition among the dwindling number of large business owners have undermined the depth, diversity and social responsibility of public information contents. At the same time, media organizations are predisposed to using information and ideas produced by government, interest organizations and other partisan sources than diving deeper into unraveled society ills through investigative reportage.

Accordingly, politicians and political organizations avoid having direct contacts with journalists where they could be bombarded with questions on their quick fortunes. And since news organizations look for well produced events and stories to publish, most of them are forced to compromise their positions dancing to the tune of politicians and advertisers.

But a serious journalist must know the challenges of the profession and work within the ambits of its ethics to ensure its survival. According to Ukanu (2005:97) “the mass media in Nigeria face two major challenges. First, they have the challenge to make all Nigerians aware of the critical issues and procedures upon which the success of the campaigns from shaping a new political order depends. Second, the news media are challenged to encourage a thorough self-examination of their own policies and performance in view of the new political order.” Except this is done, the media industry and the practitioners would continue to loose their integrity in public view.

Journalists should note the truism of the popular adage that states: “he who pays the piper dictates the tune.” They should equally note: “but the way to blow the pipe depends on the professional wizardry of the piper.” Where we have failed to bring our professional wizardry to bear positively on the profession, then we are more of disasters than assets to the profession, and posterity would certainly not vindicate us.

Photojournalism works within the same ethical issues based on objectivity just like any other genre of journalism. What to shoot, how to frame and how to edit are constant issues to consider. To photograph news for an assignment is one of the most ethical problems photographers face. Photojournalists have the moral responsibility to decide what pictures to take, what pictures to stage and what picture to show the public.

In America for instance, photographs of violence and tragedy (bizarre) are prevalent because of the unstated rule of thumb that: “if it bleeds it reads.” The public is attracted to gruesome photographs and dramatic stories. A lot of issues or controversies arise when deciding which photographs are too violent to show the public.

Furthermore, photographs of the dead or injured raise controversy because usually the name of the person depicted in the photograph is not given in the caption. The family of the person is not often informed of the photograph until they see it published.

Another issue is the right to privacy and compensation of the news subject. Photojournalists face the ethical dilemma of whether or not to publish images of victims of violence. This is because the victim’s right of privacy is not usually addressed or the picture is printed without their consent and that could lead to litigation. The issue of subjects (not necessarily of violence) seeking compensation for their pictures to be published especially if the picture’s of controversial nature is another ethical issue.

Another issue in photojournalism is photo or picture manipulation. Journalists manipulate pictures and subjects to alter the original image so that checking the authenticity of the original is impossible. It is believed that photos never lie. But because it is human beings that operate machines, technical composition and content manipulations are unavoidable. When this is done, the credibility of that visual image is eroded or its truth undermined. At times the situation is worsened when a medium uses a wrong outline to accompany an image, and this effects the credibility of the medium.

The next is that of right to privacy, celebrities have always complained when camera men pursue them to snap their outings for sensational reporting. Yet the people who view such pictures hardly complain of violating some one’s right to privacy. In many nations, however, privacy right differs between private and public persons (celebrities). Because the celebrities are public figures, they often complain bitterly when the camera focuses them on controversial issues. When a news story is so compelling as to draw world-wide attention, the subject or celebrity has legal right to privacy.

Another issue is stereotyping. You often hear people say: “Are you not a Nigerian, do it the Nigerian way,” referring to the criminal or corrupt tendency often associated with Nigerians. People talk about African time as though Africa has its own time different from the Great Meridian Time (GMT). The talk of “it is women subject,” that is Igbo made.” In Taraba State in particular people renege upon some ethnic nationalities: Wurkum, Mumuye on baseless tradition belief, such that one often hears remarks as “look at this Mumuye, Wurkum etc.” this is stereo type.

These familiar remarks are associated with ethnic, gender, regional, physical characteristics, natural behavior or even habitation. You hear people say “you mountain or village dweller” in such as derogatory or scornful manner that tends to show that village life was evil and people should desert it. Journalists at times perpetrate stereotypes when they are ignorant of the realities or peculiar circumstances of their news sources and they become too lazy to investigate such derogatory remarks to establish their true antecedents. At times it is not an issue of ignorance but a mindset titled toward racism, chauvinism, nepotism, fundamentalism, regional biases or other sentiments that blur objectivity.

Research has shown that when editors from the west want to report any story from Africa, they select photos on crime, sports or entertainment. Accordingly, many readers form their opinion about individuals from their cultural group views than from the pictures they see on the media.

Another issue is advertising and editorial blurring. Here media practitioners fuse or blur advertising and

journalism “into advertorial” for print and “infomercial” for, broadcast in a bit to persuade unsuspecting viewers to purchase a product. They conceal under news to fool audience to buy advertisers product, or they bamboozle audience to accept them as news stories. The audience is here by fooled by the powerful visual messages and perceives the picture as part of a news story.

5.0 The way forward

In view of the fact that political and economic situation exerts a lot of influence on media, practitioners must ensure that the content of political adverts are relevant to the environment and the objectives of the parties and the nation. This must be done without infringing upon the moral and cultural heritage of the people. (Sannie 2000:266)

Since the media, especially television have been used extensively for political communication in view of their use of local and foreign languages with the impact of pictures, colours and glamour on the audience, regulating bodies in advertising should ensure this privilege is not abused through picture manipulation. In other words, products, goods and services offered by advertisers should not be projected more than the actual benefits derivable from such products on stereotyping and other sentimental reportage. Journalists should guard against this by taking time to investigate before they publish their news/report. To investigate means to “uncover information that is of public interest... it is detecting or exposing crime or a serious misdemeanor, protecting public health and safety. It is preventing the public from being misled by some statements or actions of individuals or organization.” (Harcup 2009:102) Also, journalists should strive in their commitment to analyse personalities or issues in such a way that will project the idea they want to give viewers.

According to Agbanu and Nwammuo (2009:134) “All the relevant and significance evidence should be pointed out the writer should throw light on news development by providing a frame of reference i.e. he should know fact that preceded or immediately followed an event. Further on biases, when covering a story such as funeral of a beloved one, a journalist should be guided by objectivity and news worthiness of the event and not whip sentiments or emotions. He should not be so emotional as to report events that are not newsworthy simply because his loved one is affected. For journalism require that we give truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the events in a context which give them meaning.

An ideal journalist should not be sensational. He should endeavour to tell his stories in pictures that explain, rather than cause the reader to ask questions. When photojournalists use digital photograph to capture and manipulate pictures or images the editors should try to use their experiences to mitigate the effect of this unethical practice by taking full control of the photos before getting them published. Above all, in spite of the prevalence of technological devices that make manipulation of images easy, the photojournalist should still tell the truth. He should hunt for events that tell of the daily accomplishments in his community which happen naturally. He should by no means try to “set up, pose or stage manage reality” to satiate his sentiments and ambition, and cause chaos in society. He shouldn’t allow sentiments or personal interest bamboozle him to exacerbate our heated polity because the result of his action may led to a chaos that could engulf him.

6.0 Conclusion

The image of Nigeria and indeed Nigerians has greatly eroded over the years on the international scene due largely to negative attitude and to a great extent negative stereotypes promoted by foreign media such as Voice of America (VOA), BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), Radio France International (RFI) against Nigerians. Some of the great stereotypes published about Nigeria on the foreign media, according to Effiong (1991) are: a nation with probably the highest degree of human rights, abuse in the world, a country in which there is nothing like fundamental human rights, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, country with the worst case of human right abuse among other stereotypes. It is therefore, instructive for our indigenous media to be more circumspect and work towards redeeming the nation’s battered image rather than perpetrate it.

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