

# Ethical Challenges in Journalism Practice: Balancing Media Ownership Interests and Public Responsibility

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## ABSTRACT

Ownership plays a pivotal role in the regulation of mass media, often presenting media managers with the delicate task of balancing the interests of media owners and the public, while adhering to legal and ethical standards. Journalists, like professionals in other fields, adhere to a code of ethics that outlines moral principles, guidelines, and rules governing their conduct and interactions with the public. Ethical challenges are pervasive in journalism, both globally and in Nigeria, requiring journalists to navigate complex decisions regarding their behavior and their interactions with various stakeholders. This study examines ethical issues in journalism practice and the challenges faced by journalists. It suggests that addressing the challenges stemming from media ownership requires greater press freedom. This would empower reporters and editors in government-owned media organizations to work without fear of reprisal from owners, while also enabling private media owners to operate without the fear of government interference.

**Keywords:** Ethical challenges, Journalism practice, media ownership, Press freedom, public responsibility

## INTRODUCTION

Media ownership significantly impacts the regulation of mass media, posing a challenge for media managers who must balance the owner's interests with the public's welfare while upholding legal and ethical standards. Whether media ownership is private or public, the owner's interests heavily influence managerial decisions. Media ownership is a recurring theme in media discussions, reflecting the notion that "he who pays the piper dictates the tune." The type of ownership also affects the organization's freedom and efficiency. [1] noted that government or concentrated ownership tends to turn media into tools for those in control rather than serving their intended purposes of surveying the environment, correlating parts of that environment, transmitting culture, or providing entertainment. [2] highlights the influence of ownership on the operations of broadcasting organizations, emphasizing that the policies set by those paying media workers' salaries determine station operations. Media practitioners in Nigeria often face difficulties stemming from various ownership dynamics, as owners employ measures to exert control over media managers at all levels. [3] provides a list of such measures, including directives on coverage, staff redeployment, imposition of outside partners, promotion or denial thereof, bribery, gifts, fear creation, and fiction within the media establishment. This study aims to assess the impact of media ownership on journalists' ethical adherence.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the Absolutist and Social Responsibility Theories. The Absolutist Theory posits that there are universal moral values guiding all human beings regardless of time, place, or age. It holds that a morally right action should be applicable everywhere, at all times, and in all circumstances. [4] suggests that ethical absolutists believe in a single, universal moral code that applies to everyone regardless of changing opinions, traditions, or conditions. In journalism, proponents of this theory, as articulated by [5], advocate for absolute and universal journalistic ethics, including truthfulness, fair play, accuracy, balance, and objectivity, which should guide journalists worldwide and form the basis of a universal code in journalism.

Journalism practice involves a significant level of interaction between journalists and society members, to whom the journalist disseminates information. This relationship places a considerable level of responsibility on journalists, demanding strict adherence to ethical standards of the profession. This paper is grounded in the Social Responsibility Theory, which originated from the Hutchins Commission of 1947. According to [6], this theory posits that freedom entails an accompanying obligation, with the press responsible to society by fulfilling essential functions of mass communication. While emphasizing the importance

of an independent press in scrutinizing social institutions and providing objective, accurate news reports, the Social Responsibility Theory also advocates for media to contribute to the development of productive and creative communities [7, 6]. It asserts that media should be free from government control but must serve the public interest [7].

[8] adds that professionalism should be developed to achieve higher performance standards while maintaining media self-regulation. This theory is particularly relevant as it highlights the responsibility of media to society, emphasizing the importance of adhering to ethical codes to fulfill the primary task of disseminating accurate information to the public.

### Conceptual Clarifications Ethics

Ethics originates from the Greek word "Ethos," signifying character or the qualities of a virtuous person. According to the Advanced Learner Dictionary, ethics is the science of morals, a branch of philosophy concerned with character, conduct, and moral rules. [9] defines ethics as a philosophical branch dealing with values related to human conduct's rightness or wrongness and the goodness or badness of motives and ends. Ethics distinguishes between good and bad behavior. [10] emphasizes that ethics, once officially adopted, is binding on all members of a profession, and violation may result in discipline, reprimand, blacklisting, or expulsion. [11] describes ethics as adherence to standards of behavior dictated by a sense of right and wrong in personal and interpersonal relationships. [12] views ethics as rational thought application by media professionals when faced with moral dilemmas, while [6] regard ethics as crucial for social or professional cohesion, providing stability and security.

[13] defines ethics as the branch of knowledge concerned with standards of conduct, while [14, 15] see it as a set of principles guiding behavior. Ethics can be understood as a set of rules or moral principles guiding a profession's activities. While there's no universally accepted code of ethics for media practitioners, it varies with culture, exposure, and societal demands, reflecting the dynamic nature of culture. Nonetheless, certain fundamental provisions are essential for professional practice.

### Professionalism and Ethical Standard

Professionalism encompasses the conduct, objectives, and characteristics defining a profession or a professional individual. It entails the qualities, skills, competence, and behaviors expected within a specific profession [16]. [17] asserts that every profession's identity is rooted in standard principles, with ethical values inherent in professional ideology to ensure standardized practice. Ethical standards

within a profession are described as rules governing conduct and revealing professional obligations, guiding journalists' identity and practice [17]. [17] further expands on journalistic professionalism, defining it as norms and standards constituting outputs recognized as quality journalism. This definition broadens the scope of journalistic professionalism to encompass contextual considerations evaluating media performance and the quality of information conveyed to the public.

### Journalism Code of Ethics

Journalism, like other professions, adheres to ethical codes that govern its activities. These codes comprise moral principles, guidelines, and rules that dictate journalists' behavior in their practice and interactions with the public. Thus, the journalism code of ethics is a collection of moral principles guiding the journalism profession. They include:

(1) **Editorial independence:** This implies that the responsibility for making decisions regarding the content of news rests with professional journalists.

(2) **Accuracy and fairness:** (i) Ensuring the public's access to factual, accurate, balanced, and fair reporting is the primary goal of ethical journalism and the foundation for building public trust and confidence. (ii) Journalists should avoid publishing inaccurate and misleading information. If such information is inadvertently published, timely corrections must be issued. Providing the right of reply is essential to uphold principles of justice. (iii) Journalists must endeavor to distinguish between facts and conjecture or commentary while performing their duties.

(3) **Privacy:** A journalist must uphold the privacy of individuals and their families unless it pertains to public interest. (a) Information regarding an individual's life or their family should only be disclosed if it directly impacts public interest. (b) Disclosure of such information should be justified only if it serves to: (i) uncover crimes or serious wrongdoing, (ii) reveal anti-social behavior, (iii) safeguard public health, morality, and safety, (iv) prevent the public from being misled by an individual's statements or actions.

(4) **Privilege/non-disclosure:** i) Journalists must adhere to the universally recognized principle of confidentiality and refrain from revealing the source of information obtained in confidence.

ii) Journalists should honor agreements made with sources of information obtained under "off-the-record" or "background information" conditions and avoid breaching such agreements.

(5) **Decency:** A journalist must dress and behave in a manner that aligns with public standards. (i) Journalists should avoid using offensive, abusive, or vulgar language. (ii) Journalists should refrain from

depicting explicit details, whether in words or images, of violence, sexual acts, or disturbing scenes.

(6) **Discrimination:** Journalists should avoid making negative or derogatory remarks about a person's ethnicity, religion, gender, or any physical or mental condition.

(7) **Reward and gratification:** (i) Journalists must not seek or receive bribes, favors, or gifts to withhold or publish information. (ii) Charging for the publication of news undermines the integrity of news as an impartial, accurate, and unbiased report of events.

(8) **Violence:** Journalists must avoid presenting or reporting acts of violence, armed robberies, terrorist activities, or vulgar displays of wealth in a manner that glorifies such actions to the public [18].

(9) **Children and minors:** Journalists must refrain from identifying children under the age of 16, whether by name, picture, or interview, who are involved in cases related to sexual offenses, crimes, rituals, or witchcraft, whether as victims, witnesses, or defendants.

(10) **Access to information:** Journalists should aim to use transparent and truthful methods when gathering information. Extraordinary methods should only be employed when it serves the public interest.

(11) **Public interest:** Journalists should endeavor to promote national unity and serve the public good.

(12) **Social responsibility:** Journalists should advocate for universal principles such as human rights, democracy, justice, equity, peace, and international understanding.

(13) **Plagiarism:** Journalists must not plagiarize the work of others, whether in whole or in part, without proper attribution and/or consent.

(14) **Copyright:** (i) When a journalist reproduces a work in print, broadcast, artwork, or design, they must provide proper acknowledgment to the author. (ii) Journalists must comply with all rules of copyright as established by national and international laws and conventions.

(15) **Press freedom and responsibility:** Journalists should always work to uphold and promote both press freedom and responsibility.

#### **Ethical Issues for Journalists**

Journalists worldwide, including those in Nigeria, encounter complex ethical dilemmas. These challenges encompass decisions regarding ethical behavior, involving various public figures such as presidents, ministers, governors, commissioners, media owners, and other stakeholders both within and outside government who are impacted by journalistic activities. The following scenarios provide examples of the types of ethical issues journalists may confront.

(1) A journalist receives confidential information about potential illegal conduct by a stakeholder.

(2) A journalist struggles with maintaining objectivity when writing news that a News Editor has edited to favor a friend, potentially influenced by career aspirations.

(3) A General Manager expresses concern to the Editor about airing a report that may anger the Governor.

(4) A journalist is offered money to remove previously stated remarks made by a politician. According to [14], various ethical issues arise in the Nigerian journalism landscape, including materialism, bribery, corruption, embezzlement, fraud, sycophancy, and indiscipline. Journalists grapple with problems such as sycophancy, character assassination, internal and external pressure, source confidentiality, bribery, sensationalism, plagiarism, sexism, moonlighting, and invasion of privacy, among others.

#### **Media ownership and the media situation in Nigeria: An overview**

Media ownership refers to the rights held by an individual, group, or institution over a media organization. These rights extend to determining corporate policies, editorial direction, content, and staffing of the media entity. In a direct sense, media ownership grants ultimate gatekeeping authority, guiding the decisions made by individuals involved in the gatekeeping process. On a broader scale, it also bestows some degree of influence in political and socio-economic spheres of society. It's no surprise that media ownership is highly sought after, with governments, institutions, and individuals vying for control or influence over it.

The Nigerian Constitution (Section 36, subsection 11) explicitly guarantees the right of every person to establish and operate media outlets for the dissemination of ideas and opinions. In Nigeria, three primary forms of media ownership can be identified:

**Ownership by Government:** This ownership model applies to media organizations owned and funded by the government, such as the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), and New Nigerian newspaper. These entities are often viewed by social scientists as pursuing objectives of social welfare and harmony, typically in the national interest, and are expected to operate as public service corporations. However, the extent to which they truly serve the public interest in their activities remains a subject of debate. Scholars argue that economic interests and the influence of ruling parties and the government in power often cloud the vision of government-owned media houses. [19] asserts that the primary

motivation for government ownership appears to be economic, compounded by the perceived lack of impartiality on the part of privately-owned media. He contends that governments seek to publicize their policies, programs, and activities and shape public perception, which they may not achieve through privately-owned press.

**Ownership by Private Persons/Institutions:** This describes the system in which individuals or groups establish, finance, and oversee the management of media organizations. Examples include newspapers like the Guardian, Champion, Vanguard, the Punch, and Independent, as well as broadcast outlets such as Channels Television, Minaj Broadcast International (MBI), Silverbird Television, Rhythm FM, Raypower FM, and Africa Independent Television (AIT), among others. Privately owned media entities are typically more commercially driven than their government-owned counterparts. Privately owned media are presumed to have greater freedom in critically covering government policies and actions, as they are, in principle, free from direct official interference. They are only required to adhere to legal constraints in their reporting and may have less concern about government's reactions to their messages.

**Co-ownership by Government and Private Persons:** This category of media ownership is less common compared to the first two. It involves shared proprietary rights between the government and private individuals over a media organization, although instances of such ownership patterns are scarce. An example is the Daily Times newspaper, which saw shared ownership between the Federal Government and private owners in 1976 when 60 percent of its equities were compulsorily acquired by the military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo. This arrangement was reversed in 2003 when the paper was returned to private ownership under the Federal Government's privatization program.

The influence of media ownership on media operations is profound, as it is commonly believed that the person funding the media organization dictates its editorial direction. Media owners have the authority to hire and fire reporters and editors, leading to what is known as "ownership pressure" in media ethics. Editors, appointed by media proprietors, often reflect the owner's preferences within the newsroom to ensure editorial alignment with their interests. Ownership pressure can manifest in various ways, such as publishers pressuring editors to write editorials in specific ways or even requesting the publication of pre-written editorials prepared by the publisher or their representatives. Media independence, according to

[20], begins where the owners' fundamental interests end. He suggests that the notion of press freedom may be a facade perpetuated by the ruling class to deceive the masses.

Media ownership has long been a contentious issue in Nigeria, sparking public attention and heated debate. Particularly in a democratic system, ownership and control of the media remain controversial topics. Calls for the media to fulfill its essential functions of informing, educating, entertaining, and serving as a watchdog over the government and citizens emphasize the significance of media ownership patterns in determining effective performance of these roles.

#### **Addressing the Challenges of Media Ownership: The Way Forward**

Considering the intricate nature of the current situation, it would be overly simplistic to suggest that a meaningful solution can be achieved solely by urging the media to assert their independence in the face of ownership pressure. Instead, a comprehensive approach that addresses the root of the problem and incorporates the input of all relevant stakeholders in the media industry is preferable. Therefore, in order to tackle the challenges posed by media ownership to good governance, the following factors will be considered:

- The government plays a crucial role in ensuring press freedom. Granting greater freedom to the press can encourage reporters and editors in government-owned media houses to work without fear of retribution from owners. Similarly, private media owners would feel less compelled to restrain their staff out of fear of offending the current government.
- Media professional organizations such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) are guardians of journalistic values and ethics. These organizations, collectively known as the Nigerian Press Organization (comprising NUJ, NGE, and NPAN), can facilitate constructive dialogue between journalists, editors, and media proprietors. Regular communication among these stakeholders can help establish consensus on acceptable standards regarding the relationship between professionals and media owners.
- Media owners themselves have a role to play by critically evaluating the implications of their exercise of ownership

power over their media outlets. Reflecting realistically on the potential gains or losses resulting from their management practices can contribute to fostering a healthier media environment.

- Journalists need to demonstrate fearlessness and courage in their work. Professionalism and ethical conduct should

guide their actions, resisting the temptation of accepting bribes or favors. Journalists committed to national interests over personal or partisan agendas, and who prioritize truthfulness over sensationalism, are essential for maintaining the integrity of the media and serving the public.

### CONCLUSION

Recognizing the contentious relationship between the media and their ownership in Nigeria's history of media and political discourse, it is imperative to address this issue directly to mitigate its impact. Therefore, prioritizing national interests above all other considerations is crucial. This requires adhering to the principles advocated by Development Media theory. Each stakeholder must refrain from prioritizing sectional, ethnic, religious,

political, cultural, or economic interests that hinder meaningful progress in utilizing the media for promoting good governance and national development. Placing national interests above all else is essential for fostering a constructive relationship between the media and their ownership, ultimately contributing to the country's development and progress.

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