

ETHICAL ISSUES IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviewed ethical issues in the development communication in Nigeria. The media being portrayed as societal agents of dissemination of information by which people shape their opinions, ideals and expected to operate within the purvey of its ethical code have been criticized for falling below societal expectation that Johnson (1997) termed as “the seven deadly sins of the media” .This paper is motivated by the need to correct these ethical anomalies. The study was descriptive, made use of content analysis and data sourced from the secondary sources. The study found that the Nigerian media is corrupt and noticeable diverse unethical conducts among the professionals was observed. The study concludes that the media have a moral duty and awesome responsibilities in spite of the various legal restraints to serve as societal agents of positive change and social realities. It recommends the use of moral reasoning and principles of duty as the guideposts upon which ethical and worthwhile practice of the media revolves. It solicits for the unalloyed co-operation and strong relationship among the stake holders in the media business – Government, Proprietors, Society and a host of others. Media organisations should strive to implement policies that present moral and ethical values as part of their corporate culture.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concern with ethics and exponent roles of the media as an agents of dissemination of new ideas from unreluctant experts to an assumed ignorant target social systems . Ethics means the study of morality and a branch of philosophy that deals with the moral component of human life. It is the study of rights and who is or should be benefitted or harmed by an action (Day, 1991). It is the key which holds society or profession together by providing stability and security essential for professional cohesion. That is, it involves thinking about moral problems, judgement and application of those moral values that a particular group has accepted as its official norms. However, since the media holds an enormous influence and coverage on the society, it is important to be moral and ethically inclined in order to be perceived as professional and serving moral purposes. Today, adequate development communication cannot be achieved without putting the media professional ethic into cognizance as a guiding force behind patriotic developmental information dissemination. Unfortunately, ethical dilemmas are all around us. They rear their gory heads around and woven into the fabric of everyday life, persistently challenging our ethical sensibilities.

In this paper, the writer examines the controversy in ethical issues ,influence and impact of ethics on development communication and also assess how ethical choices can be hung upon unfettered ethical precepts in both our personal and professional life.

METHODOLOGY

The Researcher uses a descriptive method and sourced from secondary sources, thereby employed content analysis to drive home his points.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethical theories are the map road of morality that direct each person to the best way to behave in a certain situation, Merrill (1997) and Okunna (1995) defines an ethical theory as a set of rules forwarded to describe, explain, prescribe or predict human ethical conducts. Decades ago, scholars of philosophy have come up with numerous general ethical guidelines that serve as conduits for taking ethical decisions for evaluating one's behaviour.

According to Merrill (1997) Journalists can be ethical when they uphold decisions or behave in accordance with any of the ethical theories. He is of the opinion that philosophers gave difference criteria for taking ethical decisions from which to determine morality. Though, every theory is a total philosophical unit from which a solution is provided for the correct ways of doing things.

The scholar in his analysis of the ethical theories established the need for positive media ethics by identifying two forms of journalists; the Libertarian and the Communitarians. The Libertarian media practitioners are said to be inner-directed going by those ideologies that hinged on personal ethics. Ofcourse, the Communitarians can be adjudged as to be other-directed, that is, for civic transformation and professional codes. He, however, concluded that though there have been various controversial ways of classifying theories of ethics approaches, yet, he categorises all under two major forms – Pragmatic and Humanistic.

Pragmatic according to him talks about thorough investigation and reporting of truth for forthright disclosure of the days happenings while Humanistic is interested in self-improvement of individual journalists and their concern ethically for their sources or audiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Literature Review looks at the evolution of development communication, consolidation and synergy of development, social change and development communication, definition of ethics and its branches. Lastly, it discusses different ambers of ethical issues in development communication.

Evolution of Development Communication

The United States Of America (USA) developed a plan after the second world war to construct those war torn Western Europe. The effort known as "*Marshal Plan*" was a huge success. With man power and financial investment, Europe was brought back to life with higher standard of living that it had before the war. The Marshal Plan had worked like magic, in less than ten years. It turned destruction and devastation into construction and industrialisation.

So, the success of the Marshal Plan strategy seems to have been the cornerstone for the anxiety towards development in the developing countries of Africa, Asian and Latin America in the 1960s. Most of these nations had just gain their liberty from the colonialists and were channelling their activities towards establishing a solid socio-economic footings that would promote the living standard of their people.

Though, having the reconstruction of war devastated countries as target, the plan was absolutely geared towards economic empowerment for it was strongly noted that a buoyant economy is the surest and fastest developments. (Moemeka, 1989).

Development, Social Change And Development Communication: The Consolidation and Synergy

Development according to Moemeka (1989) is a positive change for the better from conditions (social, political, cultural and human) that are no longer considers good enough for the goals and aspirations of a society to those that are likely to meet those goals and aspirations. Inayarullah (1975) defined development as changes for word patterns of society that allows better realisation of human values that allows a society greater control over its environment and over its own political destiny that enables its individuals to gain increased control over themselves.

The two definitions are economic and human aspect based which are just an iota of total developmental objectives. Roger (1977) described it "as a widely participatory process of social change in a society intended to bring about both social and materials advancement.."

Social change is described by Roger(1983) as the process by which alteration occurs in the structures and functions of a social system. According to him, social change is a very strong tool for evacuating effects of “modernisation Pollution”, provision of well constructed and multi-carriage highways, right legal provision for people’s freedom e.t.c. Rogers also agreed that while “Development” is directed solely at replacing notable retrogressive behaviours, attitudes, barbaric approaches, structures and systems, Social change gears at readjustment or restructuring by scrapping the undesirables from the attitudes, behaviours, systems and structures.

Development Communication

Development Communication can be seen as the use of communication techniques, technology, principles, and practices in the process of development. It places communication in a prime position regarding human activities and showing its effective use.

Development Communication places strong emphasis on exchange of opinion and ideas(Communication) on available facts and figures so as to create understanding. In a nutshell, Development Communication advocates the concept of participation, positive change and understanding. That is, to establish a forum in which people are encouraged to participate in the discussions relating to “*planning*” and “*execution*” of development project, an atmosphere which facilitates understanding of issues related to development initiatives and ways to achieve expected positive outcomes.(Moemeka,1989)

Development Communication acts two major roles. First, *transformation*, this agitate for social Change in the areas of quality of life, social justice and closely x-ray modernisation in a bid to get rid of possible dysfunctions. Second role is that of *Socialisation* which strives to manage the established values of society that are important for development while discouraging those that are retrogressive and detrimental. That is, “the benefits of social and materials change that can be maximised in the interest of all citizens” (Rogers, 1986)

In a nutshell, the three concepts are quite difficult to be divested from each other since their primary aims are absolutely geared towards development. Though, their approaches towards development differs depending on individual perspectives. Yet, they could be consolidated and synergised as tenets of development.

Ethics Defined

The word *ethics* is derived from the Greek word *Ethos* meaning “*custom*” or “*Character*”. It is often thought as a rational process applying established principles when two moral obligations collide. Ethics also stand for a society’s belief about the rightness or wrongness of an act and the distinctions between “*virtue*” and “*vice*”. Such actions as stealing lying, cheating e.t.c implies the violation of ethical norms. Thus, ethics can be seen as a set of principles or code of moral conduct. That is, it involves the evaluation and application of those moral values that a society has accepted as a norms.(Day, 1999).

Dominic (1996) defined ethics as those rules of conduct or principles of morality that points us to act in a situation. Also, Odunewu (2000) opined that ethics is “*the study of standards of conduct and moral judgement... the system or code of morals of a particular profession, of a group of religion e.t.c*”.

The definitions agreed that ethics is adjudged to be interested in holding society or profession together and also involves thinking about morality, moral problems and moral judgements. They also highlighted the major concepts of ethics that propels the good understanding of the term ethics i.e rights, values, duties, standards, rules, morality and relationship.(Black and Barney, (1999).

Branches Of Ethics

The branches of ethics are divided into three, namely; Meta-ethics, Normative ethics and applied ethics.

. Meta-ethics :This is about the study of the characteristics or nature of ethics, it critically examined the meaning of such terms as good, justice, fairness and right and also strive to recognise

those that are of the best moral values,” it provides the broad foundation for ethical decision making...”

. Normative ethics :This is concerned with developing general theories, principles, practices and rules of morals conduct. Normative ethics also concern with the common ethical maladies within our profession and also the demise of traditional values that centres on certain fundamental societal rules of moral conduct. This theoretical rules is a guideposts designed to bring “ *moral order out of chaos*”

. Applied Ethics :This branch is interested in problem- solving and it is a branch of moral philosophy. The applied ethics usually use the knowledge or insights accrued from meta-ethics and the general rules and principles of normative ethics in addressing “specific ethical issues and other solid cases “ (Adams and Julian, 1983)

Ethical Issues In Development Communication

Ethical issues in Development Communication cannot be comfortably discussed without digging deep into the state of journalism ethics in Nigeria. This is because the so called development Communicators have their root as journalists before delving into Development Communication as a special field of choice .

Undoubtedly, ethically based practice of journalism is in no small measure enhances the responsibility of the media as agents of social realities, development and also bridge the ethical credibility- gap already created.

Unfortunately, the media failed to operate within the context of high sense of responsibility and morality. The society needs the media to fuel its developmental vision but fears the damage and corruption its frailties inflict on the people and the polity. (Alschull,1995)

Despite the super influence of the media, they have fallen under strong and more public scrutiny and condemnation from within and without for what is generally considered to be an unethical practices that have ravaged the credibility of the media in the last two decade.

A school of thought argued this spate of unethical practices of the media is connected with the socio-economic situation of the country which is believed to be ‘*crawling with all manners of ethical maladies and unethical behaviour, as well as a culture that had ceased to value integrity, honesty and hard work*’(Okunna, 1995).

Professional Unethical Practices

The aftermath of this ugly situation of escalating corruption of the media is a moral panic as asserted by various sectors of the polity and even the opinion leaders. For instance , the Nobel Laurate, Professor Wole Soyinka berated the media concerning the unethical behaviour associated with “ *junk Journalism*”.

Kukah (1996) while appreciating the impact of the Nigerian media on the emancipation of the people right from the iron grip of the colonialists till date, he then stated thus ;*There is indeed a thin line between economic expediency and moral standards*”

He further cited Junk Journalism as an evidence of the dept of decadence into which our society had sunk and a manifestation of generational problems within the ranks of the press itself. He also opined that unethical practices had created credibility problems for the people’s confidence as its lacked the analytical value of education and real entertainment being wrapped with *lies and fabrications*.

Agbese in his write-up entitled “*Ethics In The Press: An Insider View*” showed his worries over various unethical activities of the Nigerian media, he opinionated that the *brown envelope* is the clear evidence that Journalists accept gratification in the course of their duties. He says ;

*“This, like nothing else tarnished the image of the Nigeria Press considerably.
Most of us have at one time or another decried this practice with a rather high – minded
feelings of hurt. My understanding is that the gratification is now offered in more
acceptable colours of the envelope such as white or blue “*

The aforementioned quotation clearly stated the level of corruption that certain beats are considered profitable and journalists scramble to be posted to them.

Also, one Adebayo in the Tribune of November 5, 2001 stated that:

“The ethical imperative of accuracy, balance and objectivity which the Grand –Dads of journalism like Herbert Macaulay, Chief Babatunde Jose, Alade Odunewu and others handed down, have taken flight. The situation is so sickening today that various degrading epithets like “hired Assassin”, “News Contractors” and others have come to be affixed on a Nigeria media practitioners “

Idowu (1996) underscores the factors that leads to unethical practices, such as conflict of interest, poor technical knowledge, ownership pattern and control. Again, Johnson (1997) identified the characteristic weaknesses which call for public criticism of the media, these he tagged as *“The Seven Deadly Sins Of The Media”*, these are distortion, worshipping false images, theft of privacy, murder of character, exploitation of sex, poisoning the mind of children and abuse of power .

Personal Unethical Behaviours

The media are a social institution that must make a moral contribution to the society. This assertion is applicable to every individual practitioner irrespective of status quo. Individually, practitioners are neck deep in the worship of unethical behaviour.

For example, the twenty seven years Jayson Blair celebrated ethical Scandal published in the New York Times of May 11, 2003 is a good reference. The young reporter was alleged for “Journalistic fraud” in at least half the articles he produced as a national affairs reporter. The enthusiasts of his articles were stunned by this journalistic transgression. The widespread *fabrication and plagiarism* was seen by his employer as a profound betrayal of trust and low point in the 152 years history of the Newspaper.

Undoubtedly, the case is an exposition of individual sensational ethic challenges confronted by media practitioners on a daily basis. However, Jason Blair attitude was indefensible under any ethical standard of responsible journalism.

Ownership Unethical Acts

Media ownership in the African context especially in Nigeria is obviously a mixture of both private and government ownership. Their influence on the activities of the media are unarguably profound because *he who pays the piper dictate the tune*. Ownership and control influence disallow media practitioners to be objective and fearless in their reporting .

Dan Agbese (1995) contends that no publication, no matter how independent it may claim to be, can escape servicing certain vested interests either knowingly or unknowingly. These interest may be commercial, political, communal, tribal or even religious . The consequence is that the dissemination of news is secondary to certain major ownership interests.

Uche (1989) opines that: *“Government owned media do not expose certain malpractices in high governmental establishments, if a government paid civil servant or public office holder is involved.”*

However, any form of control that negates the essence of media objective practices are conspicuously unethical .

There is need for a moral media, serving moral purposes and being worked by moral people that owns media outfits. It is disheartening that most media owners are fully involved in this unethical practices. Salaries of workers are not paid, development trainings and welfare emoluments are not encouraging. The untoward behaviour of these media owners aggravated the unethical activities of the media practitioners. The popular “brown envelope” syndrome cumulated from the unethical behaviour of the media owners who failed to live up to their responsibilities. Unfortunately, people who work in the media are often insufficiently aware of the obligations of their powerful position and they also see themselves as part of the entertainment industry, operating in the frivolous margins of life.

Societal Unethical Conducts

According to Jonson (1997) : *“the media are a powerful great secular church anda system of great evangelism for dispensing the darkness of ignorance expelling error and establishing truth”*

This and other assertions portrayed the media as societal agents of dissemination of information by which people mould and shape their realities of life. The society is also expected to operate within the context of a high sense of responsibility and morality. Regrettably the society failed to

encourage ethical behaviour of the media but rather deepen its immorality. Offers of gratification of different form are discovered to sabotage the credibility of media practices. From all indications, Nigerian media are corrupt with numerous unethical practices and in order to attack this nauseating pest and clean- up the public aspersions and condemnation, the qq1media must probably develop the attitude for positive moral and ethical objectives.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The work found that the development communication and by extension the media have fallen under critical public scrutiny and condemnation for what is generally addressed as weaknesses of unethical practices. The ugly scenario of unethical acts of the media is a serious cause for urgent attention. This appalling situation of immorality in the media has created moral and psychological fear as expressed by various sectors of the polity including opinion leaders and veterans in the media profession. These ethical maladies are evidence of the level of decadence into which our society had sunk and a clear indication of generational imbroglio within the rank and file of the media practitioners.

At this juncture, there is a dire need for collective actions to nib the social vice in the bud before it aggravates into an unending saga of un decisive contradictory and caustic policy. All hands must be on deck considering the sensitive position of the media as formidable social institution believed to have an unquantifiable influence and power that are often said to be enormous and fearsome. So, for the successful fight against the media unethical practices and thorough amelioration of public condemnation, the media must step up the capabilities for result oriented moral and ethical objectives as well as abrogating those policies that are meant to enhance the deficiencies. At this stage , values, rules or standards, duties, rights , relationship and morality that are adjudged as the key ideas or concepts of the term ethics must have been adequately put to play.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Media Practitioners have taken a false-turn and probably through their idealistic efforts to perfect this ethical impediments, they may seriously weaken it. The panacea is for the media to abandoned its hopelessly flawed ethical principles and re-dedicate themselves to the task of morality. This does not mean that the media must forgo its watchdog functions rather the informative role should be restored to a position of primacy. In addition, media organisations and professional bodies should embarked on policies that campaigns ethical values as an integral part of their corporate culture and identity. However, Media Practitioners are enjoined to discharge their responsibilities according to the highest ethical principles. Though, the corrective efforts are going to be a gradual process, yet, much is needed to be done to encourage the media to uphold honesty, trust, and other notable ethical concepts.

Based on this premise, the study recommends that government and notable stakeholders in the media business should jointly fight against unethical practices especially through policies that would protect the free functioning of the media and permit various views points based on ethical norms to flourish in the society. Also, there should be greater participation of civil society in propagating ethically based environment as well as facilitating developmental decision making and independent media scape within the society.

Moreover, the various professional groups such as Newspaper Proprietors Association Of Nigeria (NPAN), Nigerian Guild Of Editors (NGE), and Nigerian Union Of Journalists (NUJ) should be at the vanguard of a fight to clean up the profession and make it what it used to be in the glorious days of the pre-independent press. In addition, the ethical code developed by the Nigerian Press Organisation (NPO) in 1979 must be revisited and the identified deficiencies rectified. Furthermore, personal ethical decisions have to be upheld within the different cadre of the media practitioners, this would inform individual moral reasoning and genuine principles to duties.

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