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Ethical Issues in News Commercialization: Implications on Journalism Practice in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Ethics and truth in journalism have assumed a global concern as scholars recognize that their basic constituents of objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance have merely assumed mythical qualities as journalists battle to assign credibility to their news stories. This study was designed to examine ethical issues in news commercialization and its implication on journalism practice in Nigeria. The sanctity of news is gradually being infiltrated by commercial messages of propaganda in the interest of government, private organizations, and elite individuals as distortion of news, imbalanced report, the growing tendency and lack of objectivity are the major problem inherent in journalism practice. The work closely examines the issues involved with a view of fashioning a way forward towards best practices. Anchoring the work are Utilitarianism theory of ethics, Deontology, Virtue ethics,

and gate keeping theories which are theories addressing ethical values in news commercialization. The paper concludes that recent journalism practice in Nigeria is plagued with the malaise of news commercialization, and it has negatively affected the image of media institutions in the country. Based on the foregoing, the paper recommends that ethical standard should be raised by practitioners and relevant regulatory agencies should ensure that enforcement of laws and ethics is rigorously pursued to compel media houses to comply with the ethics of the profession in the interest and development of the country Nigeria.

Keywords: *Deontology, Ethics, Gate-keeping, Journalism, Utilitarianism, New Commercialization.*

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Introduction

News commercialization has become a major trend in news treatment globally, and has become an issue of ethical concern in the media. It is a tactful strategy through which the media relegates its responsibility of surveying the society – disseminating information on the event, and people of social interest aside for financial gains. In bringing value to bear on information, the media sensitize the masses on issues of shared concern thereby setting the agenda for public debate through the news. It is from the media that the society gains information about the political process and other vital information of social interest (Adelusi, 2000).

The Concept of News Commercialization

News commercialization as defined by McManus (2009, p. 219 & 220), is “any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist’s or news organization’s best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve”. Also, Nwodu (2006) in National Open University of Nigeria (nd p.28) defines news commercialization as the deliberate presentation of sponsored information to unsuspecting media audience who perceive these information as conventional public interest-oriented news. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (1980, p.152) as cited in Omenugha and Oji (2008, p.13), expressing concern over news commercialization globally stated that: “the news has become commercial product, important developments in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant, even trivial news items, concerning urban events and the activities of personalities”. Similarly, news has become a commodity, which can be bought by those who have the money so that their voices can be heard. News has automatically become a commercial product to the detriment of important developments. In the media, news has to be paid for by those who want to be heard (Asemah, 2011). Harrison (2006, p.100), captured news commercialization “as an economic process of commodification whereby media audience are primarily seen as consumers”.

News Commercialization in Nigeria

Commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as the result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned media houses (Ekwo 1996, Ogbuoshi 2005). The government reduction in subvention at once led them to many difficulties. These include: Inability to payoff salaries, inability to procure equipment, they could no longer service their equipment. According to Ekwu (1996, p.63) as cited in NOUN (nd, p.30), “faced with the inability to pay salaries of workers, produce or service available equipment and myriad of other problems occasioned by the decline in government subvention, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) devised other means to make money”. He further explained that for a prescribed fee, news broadcast became a media relations platform for individuals, communities, private and public organizations, government, and ministries to send messages to its various audience. These messages are presented as part of the news bulletin in the forms of straight news reports, news analysis, or commentary after the news (Hanson, 2005).

News commercialization in the broadcast media is a phenomenon whereby electronic media report as news or news analysis a commercial message by an unidentified or

unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that the news is fair, objective and socially responsible in journalistic ethics (Ekwo, 1996). With the increasing rise in production cost and dwindling circulation, the media houses resort to all kinds of tricks including commercialization of the news to make money (Oso, 2000). The situation has led to a lot of compromise, with sensationalization of news stories and half-truths reaching alarming stage.

In other words, the journalists are encouraged to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thus encouraging the popular brown envelope syndrome within journalism parlance in Nigeria. In some media organisations reporters are officially made to function as marketing officers in addition to main reportorial duties. "For instance, those in charge of specialised pages or columns are made to source for adverts or supplements to support 'their' pages or the pages are dropped and probably with the reporter. "In broadcasting, producers are asked to scout for sponsors for 'their' programmes with a promise of commission" (Oso 2000, p. 30). This explains why Akinfeleye (2007), classified journalism practice in Nigeria as cocktail journalism, 'journalism of next-of-kin' and 'journalism of the general order'.

Codes of Professional (Journalistic) Ethics

Okunna (1993, p. 27), states that "the purpose of journalistic ethic is to stipulate rules, guidelines, norms and principles that would guide the journalist in making moral decisions". As a follow up to the deregulation of the broadcast industry in Nigeria, the Federal Government in 1992 set up through parliament, the National Broadcasting Commission. This commission is responsible for ensuring that, among other things national communication policies and principles are carried out. According to the NBC, 2006 code, news is sacred, therefore, sponsorship of news cast, commentaries, analysis, current affairs programmes and editorials detract from the integrity and predisposes a bias in favour of the sponsor. News programmes shall not be sponsored in any manner including the use of backdrops. If news is co-modified, it not only distorts the information, but it is also an insult to the intelligence of the audience (Idowu, 2001). This point was corroborated by Onoja (2009) when he said that charging and receiving fees by whatever name called to cover news events, company annual general meetings, weddings, funerals, workshops, seminars, events organized by charity organizations, stations are not only prostituting the integrity of news, but they are also insulting the audience and breaching the broadcasting code.

Approaches to Ethical/Theoretical Perspectives

According to Egbon (2006) describe ethics as the branch of philosophy that helps determine what is right to do. It is a normative science of conduct, with conduct considered primarily as self determined and voluntary. It is a sort of self-regulation and self enforcement. It is of course, related to law but it is of a different nature. Ethics according to Eweluka (2004) relates to moral action, motive of character, ethical emotions; also treating of moral feelings duties or conduct, containing precepts of morality, professional right or befitting; conforming to professional standard of conduct.

Utilitarianism Theory of Ethics

Utilitarianism was propounded by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and developed by John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism is a well-known example of a branch of ethics known as

consequentialism, which states that actions are morally judged by the impartially reckoned value of the consequences. That which is good or bad differs between different types of utilitarianism, hedonistic utilitarianism and preference-respecting utilitarianism being the most noteworthy (Penslar, 1995).

Utilitarianism in general, is the ethical theory that says that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the goodness (utility) or badness (disutility) of its expectable consequences. Bentham believed that we should always choose the action which is likely to result in the most happiness for everyone affected, where happiness is defined as pleasure and freedom from pain. For instance the issue of ethical consideration in news commercialization comes in here, where the former outweigh the latter (Kant, 1964). He further identified two types of utilitarianism which are: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. **Act utilitarianism** states that if an agent is faced with a moral decision, it is morally obligatory to make the choice that brings the highest total pleasure to everyone affected. **Rule utilitarianism**: states that it is morally obligatory for everyone to act in accordance with the set of moral rules such that if everyone acts in accordance with this set of rules, more pleasure is produced than if everyone acts in accordance with any other set of moral rules (Meril, 1982).

Deontology Theory of Ethics

The most famous of deontologists is Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804). **Deontology** is a set of moral theories which place themselves opposite consequentialism or utilitarianism. Deontological Theories of ethics is an approach to ethics which focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions as opposed to rightness or wrongness of the consequences of the actions. The deontological theory states that people should adhere to their obligations and duties when analyzing an ethical dilemma. This means that a person will follow his or her obligations to another individual or society because upholding one's duty is what is considered ethically correct. For instance, the media in Nigeria should remain faithful in the discharge of their duty by disseminating information free of charge than selling news. Deontology provides a basis for special duties and obligations to specific people, such as media practitioners (Kant, 1964).

Virtue ethics

Virtue ethics looks at virtue or moral character, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of actions - indeed some philosophers of this school deny that there can be such things as universal ethical rules (Kant, 1964). Virtue ethics is particularly concerned with the way individuals live their lives, and less concerned in assessing particular actions. It develops the idea of good actions by looking at the way virtuous people express their inner goodness in the things that they do. To put it very simply, virtue ethics teaches that an action is right in and only if it is an action that a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances, and that a virtuous person is someone who has a particularly good character (Kant, 1964). For instance regarding commercializing news for profit, journalists ought to conduct themselves in an orderly manner abiding by the codes of ethics of the profession never to compromise their stand for any reason.

Gate Keeping Theory

Gate keeping theory describes the regulation of the flow of information. In 1947, Kurt Lewin was apparently the first one to use the term “gate keeping”, which he used to describe a wife or mother as the person who decides which food ends up on the family’s dinner table (Lewin, 1947, cited in Asemah, (2011, p.18). Gate keeping implies that media messages pass through different channels before they finally get to the readers; so the media practitioners decide on what to pass across to the people. The principles of the theory are consistent with demands that the news media should strive to maintain certain journalistic standards. As summed up in McQuail (2005), among others, the media have an obligation to the wider society and media ownership is a public trust; news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant and the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct.

Ethical Implications on Journalism Practice in Nigeria

With the growing concern for news commercialisation, which many believe that the practice negates all fundamental principle of fairness, equity and balance required in journalism practice, many scholars as opined by Ekwo (1996), Oso (2000) and Ogbuoshi (2005) have explored its negative ethical implications which include:

Commercialization of news violates the ethics and code of conduct of journalists, which states: it is the duty of the journalist to refuse any reward for publishing or suppressing news or comment which is usually paid to journalists.

News commercialization has affected information flow tremendously. As the majority of news is paid for, therefore, the news that sees the light of the day has to be induced by somebody or an organization, while that news that are genuine and authoritative are dropped because there is no inducement where such news emanates from. The greatest flaw in the practice of news commercialization as Ekwo (1996) surmises is that news is narrowly defined against the weight of the news source's purse (p. 69).

News commercialization makes the news susceptible to abuse by interest groups who can pay their way into the media to project an idea they want people to accept whether it is positive or not.

With the zeal to acquire more and more money through commercialization of news, many news organizations have lost their focus on investigative journalism. This has led to loss of variety in the news, monotony, etc. Many have lost their mission turning to praise singing and propaganda, which has dire consequences for the Nigerian society.

Conclusion

News commercialization is a practice that has unfortunately come to stay in Nigeria as a result of economic and psychological considerations. There is disputing the fact that the practice of journalism in Nigeria has often been misconceived and criticized due to lack of credibility in their news reportage. The regulatory bodies have not really helped matters as they are not in full control of practitioners in the field of journalism as such many things take place. Therefore, the ethical theories of news commercialization have indeed addressed the issue of news commercialization in journalism practice in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations were made:

Relevant regulatory agencies should add more bite to their operations. They should go beyond publishing and re-publishing of codes by ensuring that the media houses are compelled to comply with the ethics of the profession in the interest, unity and development of the country.

Instead of selling news, the stations can think of other sources of revenue such as airtime sale and commercial advertising or investments in the case of private stations and increased funding in the case of government stations

Media owners should not sacrifice public affairs and issue at the altar of profit. They should realize that the electromagnetic waves they are using are public property which they are holding in trust.

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