Rethinking Social Media Ethics in Nigeria

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Abstract

With the coming on board of citizen journalism, the newsroom ethics have become obsolete to accommodate the growing spectrum of the technologically driven new media structure despite the fact that social media have become relevant in information dissemination in the market place of ideas. This study which adopts a qualitative research approach interrogates the zero new media ethics in Nigeria; investigates the implications of lack of new media ethics in Nigeria's media practice; and evaluates the direction of new media content in Nigeria. Built on Scanlon's contractual theory, the paper found out that the zero new media ethics challenge is a global phenomenon and that the situation has paved way for fierce censorship measures on both the mainstream and social media structures in the country. The study recommends that a comprehensive new media ethic be fashioned out by the appropriate stakeholders in the media industry to address the abysmal scenario.

Keywords: Ethics, Media, Nigeria, Rethinking, Social Media.

Introduction

Social media platforms have gained tremendous popularity in Nigeria, providing individuals and organizations with unprecedented opportunities for communication, information sharing, and social interaction.

Social media usage in Nigeria has experienced exponential growth in recent years. As of January 2021, Nigeria had over 100 million internet users, with approximately 33 million active social media users, representing one of the largest user bases in Africa (1). The most popular social media platforms in Nigeria include WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter.

The tremendous transformation in the media sector is triggered by technological innovation. "The transformation from analog to digital communication has made possible convergence of services that were once considered completely separate, including transmission of data, but also voice, mail, graphics and video; the rise of the Internet as a global web of connectivity enables content to be transmitted between individuals or groups or to be broadcast (2). Today, with a smart cell phone, information can be disseminated to millions of people across social and economic divides. "Cellular phones now have applications that facilitate easy integration between different social media networks. They also come with installed applications that allow easy access to social media content sites, such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and individual or group's blogs, among others (3)

"The era of social media is growing at a rapid pace and the twenty-first Century could be described as a "boom" period for social networking" (4). The problematic of the study is that despite the growth and exploits of social media, there are no ethics to moderate or guide its operation in Nigeria. That provides the gap that the study wants to fill.

Ethics can be defined as "the right thing to do" or can be described as the moral philosophy of an individual group and usually reflects what the individual or group views as good or bad"4. The

mainstream journalism practice has some guiding principles from national, continental and global levels. Unfortunately, this cannot be said of the social media in Nigeria which is seen as "no man's land." Journal of Mass Media Ethics cited by (4) notes that "old ethics in journalism do not always provide ready answers to problems raised by new technology" (5). The new media revolution according to experts "requires us to rethink assumptions. What can ethics mean for a profession that must provide instant news and analysis; where everyone with a modem is a publisher" (6). Scholars argue that the media revolution has created ethical tensions on two levels – "first, between traditional journalism and online journalism and secondly between parochial and global journalism" (6).

One significant ethical issue prevalent on Nigerian social media is the propagation of false information and fake news. The speed and ease of information dissemination on social media platforms have led to the rapid spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated rumors. Such misinformation can spark tension, violence, and even threaten national security (7).

Another ethical issue specific to social media use in Nigeria is the rampant spread of hate speech and incitement of violence. Social media platforms have become breeding grounds for individuals to express discriminatory, inflammatory, and derogatory remarks against different ethnic, religious, or political groups. The consequences of hate speech and incitement of violence can result in social unrest, intergroup conflicts, and even acts of violence (8).

Nigerian social media users, particularly women, often experience cyberbullying and online harassment. The anonymity provided by social media platforms can embolden individuals to engage in abusive or threatening behavior. The victims of cyberbullying and online harassment may experience psychological distress, fear, and loss of reputation (9).

The study addresses the following objectives:

 i. Investigates the zero ethics in Nigeria social media landscape;

 ii. Evaluates implications of lack of ethics of the new media on media practice in Nigeria, and;

 iii. Examine the direction of the contents of social media ethics

Literature Review

Two key concepts – ethics and social media shall be examined for clarification.

Ethics

Ethics in philosophy, is the study of "human actions in respect of being right or wrong or the study of human conduct in the right of moral principle" (10). Etymologically, ethics comes from the Greeks, who divided the philosophical world into three parts. Aesthetics was the study of the beautiful and how a person can analyse beauty without relying only on subjective evaluations. Epistemology was the study of knowing, debates about what constitutes learning and what is knowledgeable to the human mind. Ethics was the study of what is good, both on the individual and the society (11).

Also in philosophy, ethics is a theoretical discipline that attempts to answer questions about right and wrong, good and evil (bad), what actions are commendable or reprehensive and why, whether there are means by which we can decide such basis as correct, when does a person deserve to be praised or blamed, whether some forms of punishment are defensible or not and whether some goals are worth striving for or not, what is the origin of the ideas that we have about these issues, what is meant by the terms and concepts used in making judgements of value, etc.(6).

Ethics are journalistic ethos which revolves around the science of right or wrong. "Ethics of a profession has to do with discipline, that is, the ability to control your own behaviour and way of working or work habits" (12). When something is ethical, it means living above board. "Being ethical in ones conduct means operating in the rightful and acceptable way devoid of blemishes"(13). There are many reasons why people share social media contents to others online. These are because of related issues, personal connection to the content, feeling more involved in the world; defining who they are; and to inform and entertain (14).

There are some ethical dilemmas or challenges associated with the use of social media. The major ones are oversharing and no means of authenticating content before sharing. Other dilemmas are:

- Invasion of privacy – Any non-permissive approach taken to get any kind of personal or any kind of information about an individual;
- Spamming or over publicising unasked promotional messages;
- Public bashing – Disparaging your competitors in social network sites is unethical;
- Dishonesty and distortion – It is unethical to be dishonest about anything on social networks;
- Improper anonymity and distorted endorsements – It is unethical to become anonymous but showing yourself as someone different than you;
- Misuse of free enterprise and contest – It is unethical if the sponsor gather superior design ideas from contestants that have no intention contesting; and
- Opportunism – Contents walks the user at self-serving path are unethical (15).

Holistically, experts provide some ethical theories that serve as guidelines in the discussion of ethics. The first is the Aristotle's golden mean principle which states that "immoral virtue is appropriate location between two extremes". Aristotle contend that "practical reason is exercised by individuals of practical wisdom who demonstrate ethical excellence through activity" (16).

The second school of thought is the Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative which states that "an individual should act on the premise that the choice one makes for oneself could be universal law" (17). Kant's ethical theory is universal, egalitarian and radically liberating because for Kant, reason is the only legitimate ethical authority for human action. Since every individual person can reason (regardless of where he comes from), it means that everyone can act ethically (18).

The third school of thought is utilitarianism which was formulated in the 19th Century by Jeremy Benthem and later modified by Staurt Mill. The theory assumes that the consequences of an action determine whether such action is ethical or not. Under this principle, "an action is ethical if it benefits the greater majority of the people (19). According to this theory therefore, "we are to determine what is right or wrong by considering what will yield the best consequences for the majority of human beings"(19).

The fourth theory is John Rawl's veil of ignorance which holds that "justice emerges when negotiating without social differentiations" (20). The fifth principle is the pluralistic theory of value espoused by William David Ross. The theory holds that there is "often more than one ethical value simultaneously competing for pre- eminence in ethical decision – making. He calls these competing ethical claims duties, and argues that ethical decision in each case will depend on which duty is compelling at a point in time (20). This theory differs from Kant or Mill, who proposed one ultimate value.

Social Media

The global media ecology has not remained the same following the emergence of the social media structure which has redefined the concept of journalism and information sharing and dissemination. Social media are Internet sites where people freely share and discuss information about their lives, using multi-media mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio. Using these sites, individuals and groups create and exchange content and engage in person-to-person conversation. Such takes place in many forms such as blogs and microblogs, forums and news, writing communities, digital story- telling, scrap booking, date, content image, video sharing, podcasts and collective intelligence among others (18) Social media have some well-known sites such as Facebook, Linkedin, Myspace, Twitter, Flicker, wordpress, blogger, typepad, live, journal, Wikipedia, wet paint, wikidot, secondlife, delicious, dig, radder, lulu, etc. (21).

Ethically, the rise of social networking sites, has brought with it some ethical dilemma such as violation of privacy, misrepresentation, bullying and creepiness (21). According to experts, "unethical behaviour on social media can have far reaching implications both professionally and socially" (22)

The social media regulatory landscape in Nigeria has undergone significant changes in recent years. Some of Nigerian social media regulations include; Nigerian Communications Act of 2003 and Amendments, National Information Technology Development Agency Act, 2007), Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, 2015, Nigerian Communications Commission Act, 1992) and Social Media Bill 2019

Theoretical Underpinning

This work is anchored on Scalon's Contractual theory. Espoused by T.M Scalon in 1988, the theory holds that morality is based on content and agreement. According to the Harvard philosopher, an "act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general reputation of that behaviour no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement"(4). The impact of Scalon's postulations is that "what determines the rightness or wrongness of an action is what a group of people consider and agree to be. Such agreement is not forced or coerced on people as in the case of legislation" (23). The theory is very apt and relevant to the study because it is relatively and fits into the social media ethics discourse which should be approached from people's perspective for the general good of the society.

Review of Related Literature

In a study conducted by Steven Mintz titled, Social Media Ethics in the Workplace, the study argues that social media can pave new ways for interfacing with consumers and employees, among other benefits. However, it notes that social media, when not well managed, can trigger some ethical concerns like breach of confidentiality, conflict of interest, misuse of company resources and the likes (24). The study recommends that employees should use common sense in deploying social media activities such that one's reputation and that of the employer will not be compromised.

In another study titled, The Ethical Implications of Social Media: Issues and Recommendations for Clinical Practice, Basier underscored the contributions of social media in mental health care. However, the paper notes that the use of social media by "psychotherapists can lead to inadvertent self-disclosures to clients that risk damaging the therapeutic allegiance, interfering with therapeutic processes, and placing both the client and the clinician at risks" (25). The study concludes that "while technological advancement has likely taken with it the age of therapist anonymity, therapists must take advantage of all tools at their disposal to reasonably control what information is shared with clients in accordance to their well-being and care (26).

In another study, titled "The Lack of Ethical Standards of Online Social Network, Williams appreciated the staggering increase in social network sites and noted that one of the commonly misused aspect of online social network is the sharing of photographs and videos. She recommends an "immediate need for the application of those ethical guidelines present in the physical world to be imposed upon the realms of social online networking" (26).

In another study, titled, Radical Media Ethics, Ward looked at the trends and ethical issues in new media. While emphasing the desirability and inevitability of the online media ethics, he notes that "a future media ethics should be unified by allegiance to general principles of truth and independence but it will have to develop an ethics of difference that allow forms of journalism to follow different protocols and norms (27).

Cultural or contextual Quirks affect ethical decisions

Ethical decision-making varies across cultures, and understanding these viewpoints is essential for maintaining cultural sensitivity and effectively navigating global business interactions. Some of the cultural test that effect impact on ethical decision-making include:

1. Individualism vs. Collectivism: Western countries tend to prioritize individual rights and autonomy when making ethical decisions. Eastern cultures value collective goals and harmony over individual interests (28).

2. Ethics of Care: Many cultures, including the Nordic countries and Latin American societies, emphasize relationships, empathy, and care for others in ethical considerations (29).

3. Power Distance: Hierarchical societies often exhibit a high power distance, where decision-making is concentrated at the top (30). Low power distance cultures promote egalitarianism and seek to involve multiple perspectives when making ethical choices.

Others include

Ubuntu Philosophy: Nigeria is influenced by the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes

interconnectedness, community, and empathy for others (31).

This perspective places greater emphasis on collective well-being and may prioritize the needs of the community over individual interests in ethical dilemmas.

Respect for Elders: Nigerian culture holds deep respect for elders, and their opinions often carry significant weight in decision-making processes (32).

This respect for authority figures can influence ethical choices, as decisions may be influenced by deference to elder wisdom and experience.

Religious Influence:

Nigeria is a deeply religious country, with a significant divide between the Christian and Muslim populations (33). Religious teachings and values heavily influence ethical decision-making, with scriptural guidance often considered in moral dilemmas.

Corruption Perception: Nigeria has historically grappled with high levels of corruption perception, which can impact ethical decision-making (34).

This context may lead individuals to rationalize unethical behavior as a means to navigate a corrupt system.

Social Connections and "Networking": In Nigeria, personal relationships and networks often play a significant role in business and decision-making processes (32).

This emphasis on social connections can influence ethical choices, as favoritism and nepotism may be prioritized over objective fairness.

Zero Social Media Ethics in Nigeria

Lack of social media ethics in Nigeria has a global perspective. Most countries of the world are still grappling with the challenge of how to regulate or ethically control the social media. However, the challenges are huge. One, is that social media are omnibus in nature and handled by people you can hardly trust. Two, the new media structure is relatively new and professionals are yet to fashion out the needed code of ethics (35). Another reason attributable to the zero ethics scenario in social media is that "social network communities have only a framework without soul. They are subject abuse and communication of dysfunctional information

and others that offend morality and decency" (36). Another reason for lack of ethics in social media is that the structure has no defined professional bodies like the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), Nigerian Union of Journalists, to mention only a few that can formulate its code of ethics; under social media, the citizens determine what is as news as anybody with a computer connection and website is seen as an online journalist (37). Some scholars describe the new media landscape:

The mass media environment is a chaotic one that is evolving and changing at an unprecedented pace. Formal media practitioners now share their professional space and all kinds of interlopers, amateurs and charlatans from tweeters, to bloggers, to citizen journalists, and to social media users (38). Last but not the least is the fact that the social media structure is seen by many as a fake news media unlike the mainstream media that emphasis truth and objectivity (39) opines that "the rising trend of this cancerous narrative (fake news) is fertilized by interesting political variables and unethical journalistic practice when every Tom, Dick and Harry is offering strange fire in the hallowed chamber of the fourth estate of the realm. In other words, the social media structure is the chief media of fake news

The above not withstanding "virtually all areas of life are being affected by the new media. The Internet sits conveniently at the top of communication without which man is sent back to the Gutenberg era. The work of 21st Century has witnessed tremendous inflow and outflow of communication across frontiers. The most interesting feature of the new media is that everybody has been made a journalist (39). This makes ethics desirable and inevitable in social media which is a by-product of the new media.

Implications of Zero Social Media Ethics in Nigerian Media Practice

The major implication of lack of social media ethics in Nigeria can be seen catalogues of press censorship measures against the people and media establishments in the country. A good example is the case of the Lekki Toll gate shooting which took place at the peak of #Endsars protest in Lagos, Nigeria, where the social media played the major role. "The event which was full of controversies, innuendoes,

twists and blame-shifting also exposed lack of trust, credibility and accountability on the side of our leaders in Nigeria at different levels" (40). Experts attest that "one of the fallout of the Lekki shooting impasse was the muzzling of three private television stations – Channels TV, African Independent Television and Arise TV by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC)."(41) The commission imposed a 3 million naira fine of each of the stations accusing them of heightening the tension by using unverified video footage sourced from the social media amid reports that soldiers shot at unarmed protesters at Lekki Tollgate plaza on October 20, 2020 (41).

Another case is the recent banning of Twitter by the Federal Government of Nigeria. According to Wikipedia, on the 5tth of June, 2021, the Nigerian government officially put on indefinite ban on Twitter, restricting it from operating after the social media platform deleted tweets made by the Nigerian president, Mohammadu Buhari warning the South Eastern people of Nigeria, predominantly occupied by the Igbo people of a potential repeat of the 1967 Biafran war. The Guardian (2021) reports that about 126 e-commerce suffers as Twitter ban costs N7.5 billion in three days (42) even on the Twitter ban, the NBC "press release signed by the commission's Director-General, Professor Armstrong Idachaba, dished out other censorship measures for broadcasters:

Consequent on the suspension of Twitter (operations in Nigeria by the Federal Government over the persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining the corporate existence of Nigeria, the National Broadcasting Commission directs all broadcasting stations in Nigeria to suspend the patronage of Twitter immediately. Note that it will be unpatriotic for any broadcaster in Nigeria to continue to patronize the suspended Twitter as a source of its information therefore strict compliance is enjoined (43).

Another implication can be seen in the way leading social media apostles are handled by the Federal Government. In the case of the Lekki Tollgate shooting, Ate and Ikerodah states:

The citizen journalists were condemned over the reports on the Lekki shooting saga with key players like Obianafor Catherine Udeh, popularly known as D.J Stitch who gave a live social media broadcast of the event running out of the country for her dear life (44).

Again, former presidential aspirant and a social media guru and founder of Sahara Reporters has been having it touch and rough with the federal government of Nigeria for championing an online protest, revolutions which the federal government arrested and detained him. In 2019, an obnoxious social media bill was introduced aimed at controlling and safeguarding online accounts. The bill prescribe that a person who defaults shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction. In the case of an individual, he/she is liable to three years imprisonment or a fine of N300,000 or both. In any other case, a fine of N10 million (41).

Direction of Social Media Ethics Content

Experts made some projections on the structure of media ethics with a view to accommodating new paradigms (42) provides five issues that should be accommodated in future media ethics:

- Ethics of new media ecologies: Future media ethics will guide journalism according to alternate economic models, from nonprofit to brand journalism.
- Ethics of how to use new media: Future media ethics will say more useful things on the responsible use of new media, including what journalists should (or should not) say on their own web sites and when newsrooms should use material from citizens and the Internet.
- Ethics of interpretations and opinion: The era of news objectivity as "just the facts" is dead and gone. Interpretative journalism grows. Ethicists need to fill this gap giving meaning to "informed commentary," "insightful analysis" and "good interpretations",
- Ethics of activism: Activist journalism will proliferate. But when are journalists "agenda-driven activities" and when are they 'investigative journalists with a valid cause? Rather than dismiss activist journalists, how can we think more subtly about opinion and advocational journalism?
- Ethics of global democratic journalism: We need an ethics that responds to the evolution of media, yet insist that we use our freedom to publish in responsible ways that serve democracy

- We add that such ethics should be people-driven and must be formulated for the good of the majority of the people in line with Scalon's theory. We also insist that the new media ethics should take into account changing technology and should be able to absorb the shock of technological changes.

Those (45) who recommended an integrated ethics for the future argued that the ethics of integrated newsroom, a newsroom that practices layered journalism "will bring together different forms of journalism and different types of journalists to produce multi-media offering of professional styled news and analysis combined with citizen journalism and interactive chat" (49). Experts believe that layered journalism will solve these types of problems:

First, there will be 'vertical' ethical questions about how the different layers of the newsroom, from professional editors to citizen freelancers, should interact to produce responsible journalism. For example, by what standards will professional editors evaluate the contributions of citizen journalists? Second, there will be 'horizontal' questions about the norms for the various newsroom sections (46).

It is the responsibility of media practitioners, citizen journalists and relevant government agencies to ensure an immediate draft of the code of conduct guiding the social media structure in line with changing times and changing technology.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is lack of social media ethics in Nigeria and that the development amounts to overt and covert censorship measure on the media. The study therefore proposes the direction of the content of the social media ethics. It is therefore recommended that immediate steps be taken by mainstream, social media practitioners as well as relevant government agencies to provide ethical principles guiding for the operation of the new media. This is because the development will allow reporters to professionally explore "the new media world and also draw reasonable limits on personal commentary" (47).

Abbreviations

Nil

Author Contributions

Andrew Asan Ate: Conceptualization, Patrick Kelele Edema: Writing, Ewomazino Daniel Akpor: Methodology, Florence Oghenekome Chukwubuni : Supervision

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

All authors whose works were use were full acknowledged.

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