
Rethinking Media Ethics Adherence and Enforcement in Nigeria's Media Landscape: A Call for Cultural and Structural Reform

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Abstract

This position paper critically examines the Nigerian media landscape and the ethical challenges confronting it and calls for a rethinking of the media ethics structure and adherence culture in Nigeria. The methodology is based on a thematic review of historical developments, recent ethical breaches, regulatory documents, Nigerian media codes and relevant literature. Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, the paper highlights how the erosion of professional solidarity, the rise of public mudslinging among journalists, the long-term impact of the broadcast media deregulation and partisan media ownership affect ethical standards. Five key ethical challenges are identified: professional rivalry, market-driven pressures, ownership influence and political capture, weak enforcement of ethical codes, and news content commercialisation. These challenges have eroded public trust in the traditional media, breached journalistic autonomy, and cultivated a divided media system. This paper argues that the existing ethical codes fail to encompass crucial concerns such as professional boundaries among practitioners interactions, connections with sponsors, media ownership ethics and enforcement mechanisms for ethical breaches. The paper advocates structural and cultural reform to restore accountability and integrity of the Nigerian media. Key recommendations include revising existing ethical codes to include the identified gaps; creating an independent and empowered press council; providing ethical guidelines and mandating openness regarding the ownership of media organisations; integrating systematic ethics monitoring at all levels in media organisations; and enhancing education on ethics. In conclusion, this paper urges stakeholders to take actions to reinforce adherence to ethics so that Nigerian journalism can serve its democratic responsibilities efficiently.

Keywords: Deregulation, Ethical breaches, Ethical gaps, Media ethics, News commercialization.

1. Introduction

In the early years of Nigeria's media, journalism was more than just a career; it was a cause. For instance, Nnamdi Azikiwe's West African Pilot was complemented by Obafemi Awolowo's Nigerian Tribune as nationalist fervor swept through the country. Journalists

wielded pens with conviction, driven by a mission far greater than themselves, which was freedom and nation building. Although tribal sentiments ran deep and ideological difference existed, there was an unbreakable bond of unity among early journalists harnessed for their reason to exist in the socio-political tapestry of a

yet-to-be independent Nigeria. This unity provided ethical guidance despite no formal frameworks outlining ethical codes for self restraint.

Currently, however, Nigeria's media landscape is described as broken and beset by professional rivalries, ownership capture, and ethics regulatory void (Owens-Ibis & Aondover, 2025). The media deregulation, commercial forces and politicisation have resulted in the withdrawal of ethics from journalism (Okoeguale, 2023; Ette, 2021). A striking example of this is public mudslinging and on air tit for tat that passes for journalism practice in the mainstream media. The 2023 show of shame where Rufai Oseni of Arise News was ridiculing and discrediting Babajide Otitoju of TVC for swearing on live broadcast that President Bola Tinubu won the election while the election tribunal was still in session is symptomatic of a deeper decay. The contention between the two has continued since making headlines but it symbolises injury on national conversation of decency to watch as several Nigerians lost trust in the duo alongside many other institutions. The previously described incidents are not isolated, rather, they illustrate an attempt at competitive sensationalism triggered by the broadcast deregulation of 1992, which liberalised broadcasting without the parallel development of regulatory enforcement mechanisms (Apejoye, 2023; Senam, 2021). Decree No. 38 allowed private interests into Nigeria's broadcasting industry, but it lacks sufficient governance structures to safeguard against abuse. As Obae and Ebunuwele (2022) reveal, there is now a mad scramble for ratings, and sponsors resulting in accelerated patronage and political sponsorship competitions with no ethical boundaries. It is also correct to say that press councils and media associations all over Africa are too politically constrained or institutionally weak to

enforce compliance as noted by Fengler (2021), and Nigeria is no exception.

The ethical decay of journalism is exacerbated by the lack of control over the interaction journalists share with media proprietors, most of whom are politicians or partisan themselves (Ezugwu, 2024; Okocha & Gupta, 2018). Existing codes' failures to prescribe workings of influence from owners and advertisers create risk and loopholes to be exploited. Danso (2025) emphasizes that in Ghana and West Africa, journalists face a media system that allows for political ownership and thus becomes an ethically compromising "editorial cage." Practicing journalists are conscripted into information warfare as propagandists rather than protectors of democracy (Dragomir, 2024).

Additionally, these norms pose challenges that Nigeria's ethical frameworks struggle to address precisely because they are drenched in moralistic rhetoric devoid of substantive enforcement mechanisms and language. The case made by Agber and Onyenachi (2023) illustrates how the NPO code of honour stands unapologetically at the discretion of the journalist; enforcement is absent entirely and unenforceable language lacks willful enforceability. Normative infractions are punished only within a hypothetical conscience tribunal cripplingly tethered to one's tarnished reputation, which is insufficient in an environment dominated by adoration for scandalous headlines over meaningful content.

Additionally, the merging of journalism with sponsored material is just as alarming; usually done without informing the audience. Articles that masquerade as editorials or vice versa violate journalistic integrity by inducing bias into the profession (Nanang, 2021). The merging of journalism with marketing is a profound breach not only of ethical standards but also a violation of the audience's entitlement to distinguish

between what qualifies as news and what serves as manipulation.

Based on this backdrop, it is evident that the media in Nigeria has reached an ethical crossroads. A blend of professional rivalry, neglect, pliable ethics, and institutional silence seems to have eroded the sense of unity and responsibility, which were the guiding forces uniting the pioneers. This paper positions itself within this crisis, not just to highlight the loss of ethical compliance but rather to press for action on enforcement on ethics compliance in terms of framework, scope, and structural reform. There is much need for anchoring media ethics in Nigeria beyond static codes or aspirational slogans; it needs an holistic framework which capture media deregulation loopholes, political interference, professional rivalry and fracture. The paper calls for restoring ethical journalism integration, not merely in truth but integrity, collective responsibility, and social accountability.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual and documentary analysis approach, drawing on academic literature, media codes of conduct in Nigeria, regulatory documents, and cases of ethical breaches among contemporary Nigerian journalists. The arguments presented are guided by a thematic evaluation of ethical challenges in contemporary journalism, particularly in Nigeria. Rather than presenting new empirical data, the paper synthesises existing literature and documented cases to propose reforms in ethical adherence and enforcement in Nigeria's media landscape.

3. Findings and Discussion

Historical Context: From Solidarity to Fragmentation

The Nigerian media landscape during the colonial period and immediately after independence was characterised by

professional cohesiveness and common ethical values. Journalism in Nigeria emerged as a means of combating colonialism, fostering nationalism, and pursuing social justice. Nnamdi Azikiwe's *West African Pilot*, Obafemi Awolowo's *Nigerian Tribune*, and *The Daily Times* served as more than just newspapers; they promoted civic consciousness and contributed to nation-building (Ate & Ikerodah, 2021). Journalistic endeavors during this time were deeply rooted in morality. With the founding of the NUJ (Nigerian Union of Journalists) in 1955, there was an advancement for press freedom alongside governance of ethical practices within the profession (ABC News, 2025). These values were upheld by important figures such as Chief Dele Giwa, Femi Kuti, and Segun Osoba who upheld them at immense personal cost (Anyawu, 2024). Columnists like Sam Amaka-Peru, nicknamed "Uncle Sam," were also instrumental in shaping public discourse around media accountability.

Media organisations such as *The Guardian*, *ThisDay*, *Punch*, and *Channels Television* have sustained ethical journalism in the face of political interference and commercialisation pressure (Owens-Ibis & Aondover, 2025). The earlier period was characterised by self-regulation and mutual respect. Journalists as a block protected public interest against military and colonial censorship, which helped them earn trust through consistent reporting during that period (Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023).

The 1992 broadcast deregulation under decree No. 38, which is said to have liberalised the sector, marked the beginning of this shift (Obaje & Ebunuwele, 2022). Owens-Ibis and Aondover (2025) observed that, although there was an increase in media outlets, the competition reduced ethical standards in broadcasting and triggered overwhelming commercial rivalry. This period also saw the emergence of politically affiliated

ownerships of media such as Raymond Dokpesi of AIT and Bola Tinubu's publicly debated association with TVC and The Nation newspaper. Other notable partisan figures include Ben Murray-Bruce of Silverbird Tv, Nduka Obaigbena of ThisDay and Arise News, Omoyele Sowore of Sahara Reporters, and Orji Uzor Kalu of Daily Sun who have been in the spotlight of public debate of showing tendencies of allowing partisan editorial slants disguised as objective journalism. This change reinforced strife between media houses resulting in unprofessional conduct among journalists such as public mudslinging. What touches all these incidents together is a process shifting away from unifying ethical practices towards competitive fragmentation.

Current Ethical Challenges in Nigeria's Media Landscape

The issues of ethics within journalism in Nigeria are becoming more pronounced, particularly due to its effects with harmful consequences. Despite the existence of the Nigerian Press Organisation (NPO) Code, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) Code Of Ethics and BON guidelines, they suffer from lack of proper enforcement and disregard as noted by Odionyenma et al. (2023). The challenges stated below serve as a basis to understand why immediate changes are necessary:

1. Professional Rivalry and Public Mudslinging: A key indicator of corporation failure has always been noted to be strife among employees; one arena is public media fighting amongst individuals such as journalists or broadcasters on TV. For instance, Otitoju Vs Rufai 2023 on-air tit for tat. While these actions deepen degradation disparagement, they also breach collegial respect, as outlined in the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ, 2014) and erodes public trust.

2. Consequences of Deregulation and Market Forces: The deregulation of broadcasting media under Decree No. 38

of 1992 both increased access and heightened competition, winding the clock on editorial independence (Anele et al., 2023). Due to the fact that profit maximisation has superseded ethical reporting, media houses now rely on clickbait, sensationalism, and emotionally exploitative content.

3. Ownership Influence and Political Capture: Affiliated media owners have their own politically inclined editorial agendas which influence coverage deeply. Ezugwu (2024) argues that the country's journalists' codes of ethics do not safeguard against commercial media owners who turn journalists into political gladiators, undermining objectivity in reporting democracy or elections.

4. Weak Ethical Enforcement and Self-Regulatory Loopholes: Absence of mandatory enforcement mechanisms creates a voluntary compliance framework for ethical codes. As Odionyenma et al. (2023) noted, breaches can go unpunished or punished only superficially Edore (2022) points out this problem stems from weakness ascribed to lack of self-determined structural boundaries compromised by politics or corporations. An absence of zero-sum conflict regulatory bodies means there is no mechanism to prevent unchecked breaches of ethics.

5. News Commercialisation and Editorial Boundary Blurring: One of the growing hybridisation concerns of news and advertising relates to their crossover is increasingly troubling from an ethical perspective. Advertorials masquerading as news stories for political or commercial purposes are rampant deception to audiences, which breaches transparency as well as deontological ethics (Uzima, 2024). Journalists Solicited by advertisement agencies use unethical means such as gratifications through sponsored trips or coupons to dormant agendas and brands. This editorial negligence leads to loss of public trust

coupled with erosion in credibility while constraining information provided to the public.

Although there are established frameworks for ethical conduct within professions such as journalism and advertising, those frameworks lack policy mechanisms aimed at enforcement leading to silence on persistent issues framing intractable societal problems.

Implications of Ethical Lapses in Nigeria's Media Landscape

The decline of ethical practices in Nigerian journalism does not occur without consequences. It impacts the industry itself, the public, governance systems, and even democratic accountability (Odionyenma et al., 2023). Ethics negotiable translates to the loss of moral authority and media freedom for journalism. It underscores the need for trustworthiness from manipulation instead of being-used as a tool when the media becomes a wide broadcaster of false information disguised as facts (Ezugwu, 2024; Obun-Andy & Jolaoso, 2025). The following are implications of ethical lapses in Nigeria's media landscape:

1. Loss of Public Trust in the Media: Public trust is critical for keeping societies together through shared beliefs and values (Nanang, 2021). When stories covered by journalists erode public confidence, people opt to challenge what they used to believe. People cannot identify credible news materials from paid for onscreen programmes and advertisement due to bending unethical practices by broadcasters on sponsored narratives. A 2022 report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism revealed that trust in mainstream news media among Nigerians dropped to 36%, with many citing concerns about media bias, sensationalism, and political interference. As Nanang (2021) observes, the mistrust the public feels deepens when journalists criticize each other openly or when blatant partisanship and sponsored content

masquerade as neutral journalism. In these conditions, even accurate journalism is clouded by doubt.

2. Damage to Democratic Processes and Accountability: An unethical media organisation loses the chance to act as a democracy's watchdog (Danso, 2025). Journalists surrender their responsibility of reporting on power dynamics when they become either sycophantic political aides or when soulless reporting takes precedence over real news coverage. Furthermore, skewed election coverage through paid political advertorials disguised as news; one-sided reporting on crucial national debates as well as neglecting balanced reporting on patriotic matters contribute toward disinformation and manipulation of voters (Ette, 2021; Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023). Ultimately, this erodes civil participation alongside scrutinizing policies and protecting electoral integrity which are vital in a functioning democratic society.

3. Weakening of Media Institutions: There is no doubt that ethical misconduct damages journalists' reputations but in fact, it also works against institutions. The fallout from derided media outlets due to unethical practices is losing their audience and suffering reputational damage leads to loss of readership/viewership (Uzima, 2024). In today's world of information overload and noise, trust makes up for currency; media brands that compromise ethics for exposed short term profits may incur long-term diminishment of reputation.

4. Social Outcomes (Public Cynicism and Disinformation): On the societal level, an ethical lapse in media governance fuels public pessimism, tribalism, and keyword disinformation (Dragomir, 2024). In lacking trust in mainstream media outlets, citizens are forced to resort to unregulated social media platforms overflowing with fake news, lies, and conspiracies. This not only deepens national divides but also exacerbates socio-political unrest while

diminishing the public's ability to make informed decisions. Based on a report by Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) from 2023, more than 45% of Nigerians rely solely on social media platforms as compared to traditional outlets because there is lack of trust in the editorial arms of the mainstream outlets. Consequently, the gaps created by responsible journalism goes hand in hand with alternative sources that are often unverified and extremely biased.

Theoretical Framework

Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, this paper argues that Nigerian journalism is failing in its duty to uphold public trust, professional integrity, and democratic accountability due to systemic ethical failures and weak institutional enforcement. Social Responsibility Theory positions the media as a public institution that must serve democratic society through ethical, fair, and independent reporting. This theoretical underpinning helps frame the identified issues, such as weakened ethical codes, partisan ownership, and commercial pressures, not merely as internal flaws or failures of self-regulation, but threats to journalism's democratic role.

Position Statement: The Need to Rethink Media Ethics Adherence, Enforcement, and Culture in Nigeria

The crisis of media ethics in Nigeria is symptomatic of lack enforcement and structural failure. There are some regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Press Organisation (NPO), Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON) that do issue codes of conduct; however, these codes are too shallow, largely optional in compliance, and out-of-touch with the realities of media landscape in Nigeria today. Thus, it is imperative to rethink media ethics adherence in Nigeria by re-evaluating enforcement procedures as well as institutional culture.

More so, the existing ethical codes neglect to cover three critical gaps: firstly, there is no clear direction about the relations which journalists have with advertisers or sponsors, meaning that promotional materials and marketing messages may go unchecked. Secondly, media ownership has not been defined within any specific set of ethics, particularly when owners are known to be politically active. Thirdly, in relation to the rest of the world, the ethics of journalism as they relate specifically to journalists is vague. This vagueness has led to increasing degrees of abuse, and personality conflicts in public forums. These oversights are far more serious, they threaten uncontrolled burnout without radical intervention.

Nigeria's journalistic codes need rethinking for deeper sociocultural checks. This paper calls for reputation centered responsibility. Nigerian journalism was marked by integrity and respect during anti-colonial and early post-independence years; this unity served practitioners under shared social duty rising against oppressive rule alongside patriotism. Today, competition, commercial pressure, political patronage and interference have fractured this solidarity and camaraderie.

Furthermore, the existing framework of self-regulation lacks efficacy and counteracts its intended purposes. Entities such as the NUJ and NPAN often do not possess sufficient autonomy, political motivation, or defined scopes to take action against violators. Most codes seem to be followed at the whims of individual journalists (Odionyenma et al., 2023). As noted by Agber and Onyenachi (2023), without a proactive independent press council or an orchestrated system of peer review for enforcement, ethical governance will only ever be theoretical.

Reform does not occur in a vacuum; it necessitates shifts on multiple fronts, culture being one of them. Educational institutions require the inculcation of ethical decision-making frameworks and

mandatory deontological reasoning early on in curricula. Newsrooms need to care about reporting the actual truth rather than just chasing traffic numbers and ratings. Media owners must also face punitive measures for crossing the editorial lines, while journalists must reclaim the spirit of camaraderie that unified the Fourth Estate in its unyielding stance for justice and development for Nigeria.

This paper advocates for changes directed towards media ethics adherence, while reinforcing enforcement bodies and restructuring ownership practices in order to restore the media's integrity. Without implementing these approaches, Nigeria Journalism risk losing more credibility resulting in increased distrust among the public, politicised narratives, and the collapse of journalism's democratic function.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Recommendations

The following recommendations will address the ethical gaps and and reinforcing professionalism in Nigeria's media landscape:

1. Stakeholders such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Press Organization (NPO), Broadcasting organisations of Nigeria (BON) and others in the field should review and expand existing ethical codes tailored to reinforce professionalism journalism. The revisions should advance and mindful to include contemporary issues, such as deregulation, digital, political press interference, journalist-advertiser relations, media ownership ethics, advertising ethics, professional ethics among practitioners.

2. Political leaders from both sides must create a legal framework granting formal independence to the Press Council with an allocated budget as well as clear monitoring mechanisms. This council must be empowered to investigate ethical breaches, investigate political or

ownership interference, impose sanctions, and mediate conflicts.

3. Media owners should be mandated to publicly declare their political affiliations, business interests, and editorial policies to enhance editorial independence and transparency. Also, the regulatory bodies should develop ethical guidelines for media ownership which safeguard against undue political influence.

4. Media organizations must establish ethics committees or ombudsman offices for content oversight and internal resolution of ethical challenges to foster mutual respect among journalists. Reinforcement of professional standards through regular training and sensitisation programmes on ethics should be mandated for journalists at every level.

5. All journalism schools and accreditation bodies need to incorporate a thorough media ethics curriculum to all classes, including an emphasis on ongoing ethical development instead of isolated coursework. Journalistic professional accreditation processes must include an ethics assessment component when awarding professional credentials in order to guarantee that new entrants into the profession possess fundamental values requisite for practice.

6. Professional associations of journalism, as well as unions should actively work to promote inter-journalist accountability, while curbing negative publicity, rivalry, and mudslinging as well as fostering cooperation within journalism as a whole. There should also be direct advocacy for the establishment of frameworks for the resolution of non-conformance with accepted norms and frameworks of ethics dispute mediation in order to enhance camaraderie in the journalism profession.

Conclusion

The Nigerian media landscape faces ethical problems which are detrimental towards its credibility and its role towards democracy. The analysis exhibiting the shift away from solidarity reveals issues

such as gaps in existing ethical codes, especially concerning enforcement mechanism, ownership ethical guidelines, interaction amongst journalists and advertisers' influence.

Rethinking media ethics structure and culture is essential in order to restore trust and accountability. Practical reforms include amending ethical guidelines, establishing a self-governing independent council for the press, enforcing transparent ownership of media outlets,

enhancing internal mechanisms for ethical governance, improving ethics teaching, and cultivating professional solidarity. These efforts are necessary to enable Nigerian journalism reclaim its genuine watchdog function in the increasingly complex public sphere at the wake of active audiences and to reinstate strong public trust in the mainstream media in Nigeria.

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