

Digital News Media, Ethics and Freedom of Expression – A Nigerian Perspective

Awobamise Ayodeji Olalekan

Girne American University, TRNC
ayodeji.awobamise@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at ethical issues in citizen journalism. Citizen journalism for the purpose of this research was limited to blogging sites and other independent not news online news outlets. This paper tries to identify some ethical flaws or problems plaguing online journalism today using Nigeria as a case study. To achieve this, a comparative analysis between professional newspapers (online) and blogs were carried out. Two blogs and two professional online news sites were analysed. The findings of this research confirmed the predominance of unethical reporting in blogs as compared to the professional one. It was also found out that despite these unethical practices, a lot of people still visit these sites for their news information. The content analysis was carried out by calculating the frequency of some predetermined unethical practices in the reporting of news in the selected websites. To put this research in perspective, Gatekeeping Theory and Networked Gatekeeping Theory were briefly examined. It is the hope of this research to contribute a little insight into the growth of online journalism, the relevance of Gatekeeping theory to modern day news reporting practices and some ethical issues currently plaguing this medium.

Keywords: Digital media, ethics, gatekeeping, new media

1. Introduction

This paper is trying to understand the distinct ethical problems in social media it relates to online journalism, blogging, and other information sharing platforms. The paper would also give an insight into some of the advantages of this new medium and how government regulations can promote professionalism in online journalism.

Nigeria is a relatively newcomer in the social network arena, but in recent years social networks have become very prominent and popular in Nigeria especially among its youths. Basically social media is fast becoming the go-to medium for teenagers and young adults in Nigeria for their news and entertainment. According to Farris and Harwood (2011), "Nigeria now holds the continent's record for most tracked reports of social media use during an election, with nearly half a million examples catalogued by the proprietary software at the Social Media Tracking Centre (Judith & Jacqueline Farris, 2011). This has inadvertently raised the pertinent question of how do we regulate the medium and what are the measures in place to ensure that this new medium is not abused and hijacked by 'internet vagabonds'. This is supported by Stephen Ward (2013) in his online journal where he stated that, "Our media ecology is a chaotic landscape evolving at a furious pace. Professional journalists share the journalistic sphere with tweeters, bloggers, citizen journalists, and social media users".

Now that the news is being told by virtually anyone with a laptop and internet connection (Roseane Blaze, 2012, Sunday Dare, 2011), Carolynne Burkholder stated that "the internet has created a new sphere where everyone can be a journalist, all you need is a computer and an opinion – no training necessary". According to Judith B.A and Farris (2011) "The introduction of social media means that even untrained citizens could share their objective and subjective experiences", it is therefore pertinent for researchers to understand the ethical dimensions of this newly found freedom of expression the internet affords Africans and Nigerians in particular. Social networks have given Nigerians a medium to express themselves and their opinions; the researcher however wants to find out what those limits are ethically.

This paper shall adopt the Gatekeeping theory, as proposed by psychologist Kurt Lewin and try to find out if online journalism as it is known in Nigeria today meets the basic standards of this theory. Gatekeeping theory posits that there are forces which may either constrain or facilitate the passage of news items through the gatekeeping process. Some authors claim that, that "gatekeeping in mass communication can be seen as the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed" (Cassidy, 2006).

Gatekeeping theory has also been labelled an effective conceptual approach to studying online journalists (William P.C, 2006)

Although there are a lot of papers and empirical studies on the issue of online journalism and media ethics, but the

few that have been written with particular reference to Nigeria basically talk about the emergence of the internet and online journalism or citizen journalism, but very few has looked at the ethical issues surrounding the practice. This has made it noteworthy to embark on a research to ascertain what some of these issues are. Also I hope to find out if traditional gatekeeping processes are adhered to in online news reporting and how fundamental human right of freedom of expression is being promoted by social networks.

This research shall make use of comparative Content Analysis and desk research. The researcher shall compare 10 news stories each from two popular Nigerian blogs and 10 news stories from two professional online newspapers. The stylistic method favoured by these websites shall be analysed, their choice of words, display of nudity and other obscene messages would be considered in this analysis. This would give the researcher an understanding into how ethical online journalism is.

The desktop research on the other hand shall basically involve going through relevant literatures and journals on the research topic to determine what progress has been made in the field of ethical online journalism.

1.1 Problem Statement

A media revolution is transforming, fundamentally and irrevocably, the nature of journalism and its ethics. The means to publish is now in the hands of citizens, while the internet encourages new forms of journalism that are interactive and immediate (Stephen J.A. 2013) and with over 44 million Nigerians connected to the internet, there are not far behind in the new craze for online journalism. Infact a lot of Nigerian youths go to the World Wide Web for their 'facts' and news information. Also with the fact that Nigeria is a multi-cultural, multi-tribal, multi religious, multi-lingual and multi-party (politically) system, care must be taken to ensure ethical boundaries are respected if the Nigerian media is to evolve ethically and professionally in the field of journalism. Dr. Asuni stated during the Nigerian elections that social media is a 2 pronged sword that can be used to spread positive messages, and also carry rumours. She cautioned that care must be taken not to incite unnecessary violence. From the foregoing, it is important for online journalism and news reporting to meet ethical and professional standards.

Currently Nigeria is rife with so many bloggers and self-proclaimed internet aficionados that try to promote their ideologies and opinions through this medium. However in a bid to get the most viewership/readerships/visits a lot of them throw caution to wind and opt for the sensational, obscene and generally objectionable, thinking they are simply expressing themselves. This has developed a problem for the professional journalist, as he/she is now competing against this people that have a lot of time and steady viewership that can make the biggest lie true and vice versa.. The Online News Association (2002) reports that 69% of journalists believed that online news sites did not meet the same standards as more traditional sources (William Cassidy, 2007)

Although a lot of researchers have suggested in their various researches that online journalism is plagued with a lot of ethical issues in the information gathering and dissemination, some however feel the problem with ethics began in the conventional news room and that infact online journalism provided a means for people to get more objective reporting and options. Robert Niles stated in his online journal that 'if it weren't for the Internet giving people other choices, we could be getting away with all these shortcuts and still be making our fat profits'

It is against this backdrop that I hope to determine what role government is to play in controlling the excesses of online journalism amongst other things. This problem suggests a potentially fruitful research area to help current researchers understand the issues relating to social media from an African perspective and a guide for future research into social media and ethics from an African perspective.

This paper shall attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Are online blogs and websites effective in passing across news information?
2. Are there significant differences between individual news blogs and professional online news?
3. Can online journalism influence reader's perception and behaviour?
4. Is there a need for government censorship or control?

1.2 Assumption

The working assumption for this paper is that citizen journalism or blogging is rife with unethical journalistic practice.

1.3 Justification of Study

One of the most important issues in Nigeria is ensuring that online journalist and internet subscribers follow due ethical

standards in reporting national issues. The inability of the government to make proper legislations that would monitor and control the use of the internet in Nigeria has led to a lot of shoddy reporting and bias in the world of online reporting.

Although there are a lot of papers and empirical studies on the issue of online journalism and media ethics, but the few that have been written with particular reference to Nigeria basically talk about the emergence of the internet and online journalism or citizen journalism, but very few as looked at the ethical issues surrounding the practice. This has made it noteworthy to embark on a research to ascertain what some of this issue are.

It is the hope of the researcher that at the end of this research, there would be a better understanding of the digital news reporting sector of Nigeria, some ethical issues that might be hindering it from becoming a reliable medium of information and possibly proffer some ideas on how to tackle some of these issues.

2. Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

This paper shall briefly draw from gatekeeping theory. This theory is one of the most popular theories in the field of mass communication and it has been widely studied and of course is still considered very relevant even today. The basic idea of gatekeeping is that there is some selectivity in how and which items are selected to be presented to the audience. One very pertinent question is if gatekeeping is about selecting and choosing which information is released to the audience, then what happens when there is no limit on how much information can be released to the audience? Would gatekeeping still be relevant?

According to William Cassidy (2006) said gatekeeping is an effective conceptual approach to studying online journalists. Kurt Lewin in coming up with the theory of gatekeeping posits that there are forces which may either constrain or facilitate the passage of news items through the gatekeeping process. A follow up to this theory is the Network gatekeeping theory (NGT) as suggested by Karine Barzilai-Nahon, who attempts to offer new definitions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers adapting traditional concepts to a networked society. NGT has a great deal of ramifications on understanding of information dissemination and users behaviour on the internet. This theory is particularly interesting because it focuses on how information is gathered and disseminated on the internet, which is very much in line with the basics of this paper. This paper is concerned with the ethical standards applied in online journalism, and assumes that if any sort of gatekeeping is attempted then better standards in journalism can be expected.

2.1 Ethical standards in journalism

Journalism ethics and standards according to the universal by-line "include principles to address good practice for professional journalists." These principles are more commonly known as the code of ethics in journalism. The code of ethics seek to ensure that media professionals maintain the highest professional and ethical standards in carrying out their function of informing, educating and entertaining the public (UNESCO, 2006)

Like any profession in a civilized society, there must be rules, these rules are what keeps professionals in check and ensure they do not hurt anyone in the course of carrying out their profession. These codes of ethics are mostly derived from thorough analysis of past mistakes and then forming rules to ensure such mistakes do not occur again. It is therefore only wise to assume that because the field of journalism is evolving, then the rules would also evolve. This is truer now that citizenship journalism and online blogging is becoming very popular. There is absolutely need for the journalistic ethics and standards to expand to accommodate this new changes in the journalistic landscape.

The most popular and most adopted journalism code of ethics is that of society for professional journalism. In their last revision in 1996 which is what is still used till today, they gave four basic guidelines on ethics in journalism and there are:

1. Seek truth and report it
2. Minimize harm
3. Act independently
4. Be accountable

It is generally believed that these are the basic guidelines for judging ethical standards in journalism. These guidelines were further broken down into the following as listed by Steve Buttry (2010), he listed them as;

1. Ensure all information gotten are accurate and ensure that deliberate or inadvertent errors are avoided at all cost
2. Ensure you get both sides of the story; give all subjects of a news item equal opportunity to state their point of view, thereby upholding the principles of objectivity.

3. Sources must be identified wherever possible, as the readers, viewers and listeners deserve as much information as possible.
4. Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity.
5. Headlines, pictures and other parts of the news story must not be misleading and do not misrepresent the news.
6. Never tamper with images or videos except to enhance clarity. Proper captions must be put on all images and photo illustrations.
7. Avoid undercover or covert news gathering techniques, except if absolutely necessary
8. Do not plagiarize. All sources must be properly acknowledged.
9. Be accommodating to other cultures and value system and do not try to impose you values on them.
10. Avoid stereotypes by all means possible
11. Journalist should minimize harm by, using special sensitivity when dealing with minors and inexperienced sources, be sensitive when seeking for interview or using pictures of victims affected by tragedy, be considerate concerning the right of people to their privacy especially private people.
12. Be careful in naming criminal suspects and consider their rights to a fair trial. Do not report anything that might jeopardize their chances of getting a fair trial.

These are only a few of the hundreds of journalistic ethics a reported or journalist is expected to adhere to when writing or sourcing for a news story.

According to Bob Steele (2002), a news writer should ask himself these 10 questions in order to make good ethical decisions.

1. What do I know? What do I need to know?
2. What is my journalistic purpose?
3. What are my ethical concerns?
4. What organizational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?
5. How can I include other people, with different perspectives and diverse ideas, in the decision-making process?
6. Who are the stakeholders — those affected by my decision? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?
7. What if the roles were reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?
8. What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?
9. What are my alternatives to maximize my truth telling responsibility and minimize harm?
10. Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

There is however no doubt that journalism has evolved a lot since 1996 and with the popularity of the internet and by extension blogging and social networking, there is no doubt, that a revision of ethics in journalism is long overdue. On the issue of blogging a lot of scholars have continuously asked the question of whether or not bloggers are journalist; Brad Badelt wrote that "Today's audience want to be part of the media, rather than passive receivers. Not only do they want to comment on the news, they want to be part of creating it." Jay Rosen a journalism professor at New York University stated that bloggers are journalist sometimes, but went on to say that defining bloggers is not as important as looking at their ethics (as cited by Carolynne Burkholder).

Blogs are very popular sources of information for a lot of people, in fact research as shown that lot of people actually trust information gotten on blogs more than regular tabloids, as they believe bloggers are not out to promote any particular agenda or beliefs (as cited by Carolynne Burkholder), according to the Canadian internet project in 2004, 37% of people believe that information gotten from blogs are reliable and accurate and 81 % believe that at least one half is reliable. These sentiments are not shared by professional journalist and scholars, as most feel accuracy of news gotten from blogs is questionable in the very least.

And because blogs has evolved from being a personal e-diary into becoming a major source of information for people, it has a raised some concerns as to ethical standards. One of the earliest ethical standards for bloggers was published by Rebecca blood in 2002, and they are:

1. Publish as fact only that which you believe to be true. If your statement is speculation, say so.
2. If material exists online, link to it when you reference it. Linking to referenced material allows readers to judge for themselves the accuracy and insightfulness of your statements.
3. Publicly correct any misinformation.
4. Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry.
5. Disclose any conflict of interest.

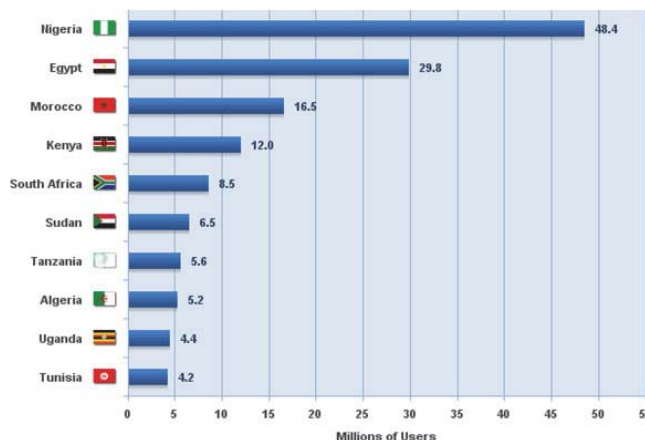
6. Note questionable and biased sources.

A more recent and popular blogger's code of ethics was created by Jonathan Dube an award winning print journalist. His codes of ethics were adopted from the Society for Professional journalism (SPJ) and follow the same 4 ethical guidelines as listed earlier.

2.2 Emergence of Online Journalism

The turn of the 21st century brought about some advances in technology and as such the media landscape slightly changed to accommodate the online media. Online journalism started in 1993 by University of Florida's department of Journalism, shortly after Mosaic, the first web browser was launched, in 1997 BBC online was launched, in 1999 Guardian Unlimited was launched and since then it has been leaps and bounds for online journalism down to 2013, when virtually everybody is a journalist and has his or her own blog. In the year 2000 Kopper et.al stated that "Online journalism is a very new and very fast-evolving branch of journalism, with academic research about it lagging far behind..." this is no longer the case, online journalism is hardly a new concept anymore and it has had about 20 years to evolve into one of the most popular media of news information. In the past 10 years or so, Nigeria has also witnessed a lot of newspapers such as the Sun Newspaper, the punch newspaper; Vanguard and Tribune just to name a few, setting up online journalism networks for their more technology savvy readers. Today Nigeria has well over 5000 blogs and about 50 online newspapers with most of them also circulating regular newspapers too.

Figure 1: Africa Top 10 Internet Countries as at 2012 Q2.



Source: Internet World Stats- www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

From the chart up, it is clear that internet penetration in Nigeria is growing fast and as such it is only a matter of time before citizenship journalism completely overtakes more professional ones. It is therefore imperative that measures are put in place to ensure strict ethical standards are followed in reporting of the news on any medium.

3. Methodology

Data shall be gotten from 40 news stories from 4 websites (10 per website); these stories shall be randomly selected.

The websites are;

1. Linda Ikeji's blog (<http://lindaikeji.blogspot.com/>) – most popular news blog in Nigeria
2. www.pakurumo.com
3. Vanguard newspaper – Most popular online newspaper
4. Punch newspaper – www.punchng.com

The researcher is going to test for occurrence of inappropriate words, bias and statement of opinion in the news item, indiscriminate showing of offensive pictures and videos. The criteria was developed based on the ethical standards

recommended by the SPJ and Jonathan Dube

Table 1: Coding Units

Coding units	Example
Inappropriate words	Analyze for sex words in the articles on the websites. Defamatory words/statements colloquialism sensational words
Bad sentences	Pandering Stating ones opinion/showing bias Defamatory statements Reporting unsubstantiated statements fact
Inappropriate Pictures/videos	Check for nudity and violence Check for inappropriate pictures of minors Check for wrong use of pictures Check for unsubstantiated images used in stories Pictures without caption or not properly captioned
Reactions/Feedback	No. of page views No of comments
Bad Structure	Look for grammatical errors Check for misleading headlines Check for unnecessarily voluminous news articles Check for ambiguity of messages (as not to be easily understood)
Word count	Number of words

Source: Author

3.1 Limitations

The researcher does not pretend this paper to be an exhaustive look at the ethics in online journalism as regards to Nigeria. I believe a more critical look at the gatekeeping theory and its application to the Nigerian landscape might provide deeper insight into how citizen journalist select and use information. Also die to time constraint an audience based research was not conducted- this would give an insight into why and how audiences choose their news sources and stories.

These limitations do not however remove from the validity of this research, as care was taken to carefully and empirically examine all relevant data and ensure its validity.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 2: Data Collection and Analysis

Variable	Frequency based on 10 new stories each			
	Linda Ikeji blog	Pakurumo	Vanguard Newspaper	Punch
Inappropriate Pictures/videos	11	12	0	1
Inappropriate words	12	1	0	0
Bad sentences	15	10	0	3
Reactions/Feedback	1200	1330	2556	970
Bad Structure	10	4	0	2
Word count	2900	8311	5751	5942
Pictures/videos	19	12	5	9

Source: Author

From the table above, it is clear that citizenship journalism has become a major player in the dissemination of news in Nigeria. They apparently have a large readership base that regularly source for information there. From the table above it

is clear that Vanguard and Punch which are professional news outlets have less and almost non-existence writing errors, as compared with Linda Ikeji and Pakurumo blogs.

The blogs generally make use of inappropriate pictures that also do not even carry captions at all. This is bad journalism, as it is expected that any image used in news writing must be appropriately captioned. In comparison, the professional news outlets use the right pictures; make sure they caption their images.

On average, blogs make use of more images than their professional counterparts, some news stories carrying as many as 4 pictures as against the 1 picture Punch and vanguard usually use.

Probably as a means to having more readers/page viewers, blogs tend to use sensational headings that most times do not complement the body of the news and are misleading. This is absent in punch and vanguard as their headlines are usually brief, concise and appropriate for the story.

However despite all these differences, blogs and professional news outlets are competing fiercely when it comes to audience participation, as blogs have almost as much viewers with the professional ones.

Because of their wide readership base and reach, it is clear that blogs are also a reliable means of getting information across. The more pertinent problem is ensuring that basic rules of journalism and news reporting are adhered to. And because people are beginning to trust blogs as a source of reliable information, it is therefore safe to assume that blogs and online media generally are capable of influencing people's opinions and views on issues.

From the foregoing, it is clear that both the Blogs and the more professional news outlets are widely accepted, and as such it becomes imperative that measures are put in place to ensure that news is factual and objective when reported on any medium.

5. Conclusion

Technology has evolved a great deal and with it every facet of our everyday lives has been impacted upon. So it comes as no surprise that our source for news information and friendship has also evolved to make use of technology, particularly the internet. Now that the internet has become a major fixture in most parts of the world, it is only normal that advertisers, marketers, producers, journalist as well as individuals would use it to their advantage. The connectivity options available on our mobile phones and other handhelds have further encouraged the rise and growth of citizenship journalism. This availability of the internet has encouraged citizenship journalism and blogging. From the research it was discovered that blogs have become a major source of information for publics, this has given rise to ethical concerns and worry amongst professional journalists. It is clear that technology and the electronic environment it creates is not going anywhere anytime soon and would only continue to advance, they are the new media which writers will now use to let their voices heard. How we choose to use this medium is what calls for some ethical standards. Because the internet has the tendency to influence people a lot and how they live their lives, it is pertinent that measures are put in place to ensure the internet is not abused especially when it has to do with news writing. It is the submission of the writer that irrespective of the right of expressing ourselves freely, care needs to be taken to ensure the sensitivity of your readers or viewers are respected and taken into consideration when writing. In fact if any sort of gatekeeping is to be applied to online journalism, then the first consideration should be about how the readers would react to seeing certain images and should also be based on the realization that a lot of young kids actually have access to these websites and as such care must be taken that all news reported adhere to basic ethics of journalism and reporting.

5.1 Suggestions for Further Research

This research has raised certain questions about ethics in online and citizen journalism. This of course leads one to wonder what the role of gatekeeping is, if so much unethical news stories and activities are allowed to be released as 'news'. It is therefore the suggestion of the writer that a more critical look at gatekeeping theory should be carried out to ascertain if it is applicable to citizen journalism and online blogging. Also a critical study of network gatekeeping theory as proposed by Karine Barzilai-Nahon can be further studied to find out if it can help tackle some of the ethical problems/issues in social networking and citizen journalism.

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