

Chapter 14

Media Ethics and Elections Coverage in Nigeria: Understanding the Context and Imperatives From a Gender Perspective

Abigail Ogwezy-Ndisika
University of Lagos, Nigeria

Ismail Adegboyega Ibraheem
University of Lagos, Nigeria

Babatunde Adesina Faustino
University of Lagos, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper examined media ethics in Nigerian using elections coverage as a lens. It focuses on the gender dimension, a fundamental factor in media and election debates; and brought to the fore the socio-political and economic factors affecting the ethical performance of journalists covering elections in Nigeria. It argues that journalist covering elections in Nigeria are operating in challenging socio-political and economic context, but are beginning to rise up to the occasion having improved on the coverage of women politicians. It concludes that despite the challenges, ethical reportage can promote gender balanced coverage of elections in Nigeria. It recommends that the media should provide platforms for engagements and give equal access to parties and candidates (both females and males); and also provide space in which freedom of expression can be exercised and alternative, dissenting, and minority voices heard.

INTRODUCTION

Elections in democratic settings affect everybody either directly or indirectly and the expectation is that whenever there is fair, balanced and inclusive participation of all people in the election of leaders without discrimination on the ground of sex or any other factor, the society will progress. As such, people should be empowered with valid information to participate in elections. Anything to the contrary, apart

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from acting outside the ambit of the law which could result in law suits, will destroy the credibility of journalists and media outfits; and portray them as unprofessional in covering elections and the processes.

As such, journalists owe their audiences moral responsibilities, which are ethical and referred to as soft laws, and now codified. The codified laws deal with the moral principles or norms for action. Ethics could therefore be termed as a normative, Meta and applied science of conduct. The normative aspect deals “with norms, standards and principles”, the Meta deals with analysis of the ethical terms while the applied “deals with the application of the ethical standards and principles to the professional practices” (Daramola & Akinsuli, 2012, p. 2).

As a result of its concern with such concepts as virtue and vice, right and wrong, good and bad, responsible and irresponsible actions, media ethics may be viewed as a sub-sect of applied ethics specifically dealing with the ethical principles and standards of media, including broadcast media, film, theatre, the arts, print media and the Internet (Daramola & Akinsuli 2012; Adam 2009, p. 317; Elliott 2009, p. 30; Perebinosoff 2008). This perspective on ethics also encompasses other adjunct journalism professions such as public relations and advertising which play significant roles during electioneering campaigns. This may account for why Okunna (2003) argued that the issue of good and bad as well as fairness, balance and rights among others (especially if related to elections) are fundamental journalistic principles applicable in all regions of the world.

Therefore, Nigeria is not an exception, hence this paper examined Nigerian media ethics within context and in relation to elections coverage in Nigeria focusing on the gender dimension that is a fundamental factor in media and election debates. It drew from the Nigerian Press Council Code (2009), Nigeria Broadcasting Code (2012) and relevant sections of Electoral Act 2010 against the backdrop that journalists are the holders of public trust. It is hoped that the argument and submission of this paper would further challenge and stimulate stakeholders in the media, ethics, election and gender issues to provide and strengthen sustainable and gender sensitive elections coverage.

Journalism Code of Ethics vs. Journalists Rights, Privileges and Social Responsibility

The journalism code of ethics states in part: “Truth is the cornerstone of journalism and every journalist should strive diligently to ascertain the truth of every event. [Again, it states that] Journalism entails a high degree of public trust. To earn and maintain this trust, it is morally imperative for every journalist and every news medium to observe the highest professional and ethical standards. In the exercise of these duties, a journalist should always have a healthy regard for the public interest” (Nigerian Press Council. 2009: Para 1 and 2).

So, journalism ethics sets a higher standard. Hence, most ethical codes go beyond ‘not breaking the law’ to outline a social role for *public interest* (emphasis ours) journalism. In Europe, for instance, at least the law tends to police only the outer reaches of what is appropriate reporting.

In other words, journalists will not act ethically in the absence of effective professional self-regulation. Whilst these are not of course mutually exclusive, it is the last view that is closer to the truth. The question that will arise at this point is: what is effective self-regulation and why does it exist?

It may be argued that self-regulation is only effective when there is a clear collective and individual self interest in making it work. However, the collective interest for professional journalism is provided by the threat of state regulation. In the past 60 years in the UK, we have seen a repeated dance of threat and retreat between the state and self-regulation of the media: when Parliament expresses outrage, self-

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