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Perspectives on the Role of Media Ethics in the Kenyan Print Media Landscape

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Abstract:

This study explores critical perspectives on the role of media ethics in the Kenyan print media landscape. In Kenya, the media plays an important role as a whistleblower. The media's characterization as the fourth estate is critical of the role it plays to oversight the government. The Kenya print media is fast becoming a strong pillar in championing democracy, the rule of law and keeping the government of the day in check. However, the watchdog role has come into sharp focus following inaccurate reportage that has led to defamation cases being filed in court. In order to avoid defamation suits, the print media should uphold high ethical standards, seek the whole truth and ensure fair and balanced reporting. This paper concludes that media ethics is critical in ensuring that the print media remains socially responsible in dissemination of information to the public. This paper recommends that print media journalists should adhere to professional ethics as enshrined in the code of conduct for the practice of journalism in Kenya.

Keywords: Media ethics in Kenya, press freedom, journalistic integrity, code of conduct for the practice of journalism in Kenya, democracy, news values, Media Act 2007

1. Introduction

Ethics involves analyzing, evaluating and promoting virtuous character and correct conduct among human beings. Media ethics falls in the domain of applied or practical ethics that guides journalists to make sound moral decisions in any given situation (Ward, 2011). According to the Media Act (2007), print media should minimize harm and have compassion for those directly or indirectly affected by news coverage. Print journalists need to understand and rely on ethical principles as they discharge their duties for the public good. As a discipline, it is important to note that media ethics draws from a wide range of philosophical principles. These principles include the Judeo-Christian principles, Aristotle's golden mean, Kant's categorical imperative, Mill's principle of utility, Rawls's veil of ignorance and Hutchins Commission's social responsibility (Keeble, 2009). The problem of media ethics lies in areas such as fairness, accuracy, manipulation of images such as graphic images, deception, confidentiality, protection of news sources and breaking news. The aim of media ethics is to determine how the existing norms apply to the main ethical issues print media journalists grapple with daily in the Kenyan media landscape. The best overview of media ethics comes from the 1947 Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press (Keeble, 2009; Siebert et al., 1956) which states that media should be truthful and fair in their reportage. Media ethics is a codification of some of the basic principles of ethics such truth, fairness, accuracy, objectivity, right of reply among others as spelt out in the code of conduct for the practice of journalism in Kenya (Media Act, 2007). Therefore, media ethics are the moral principles reflected in rules which prescribe how media personnel should work to avoid causing others harm when gathering news for publication. In Kenya, the Media Council was given the responsibility to draft codes for the conduct of journalism. Deviation of media practitioners from accepted ethical norms has ignited public debate over the years (Kadhi, 1999). The issues of invasion of privacy, objectivity, self-regulation, confidentiality among others are all outcome of violations of established codes of media ethics. Kenya print media journalists have found themselves swimming in these murky waters.

2. Perspectives on the Role of Media Ethics

2.1. Truth and Objectivity

The canons of journalism underscore the need for truthfulness and objectivity in print media reportage. In view of this, the foundation of professional ethical journalism is built on the two pillars of truth and objectivity (Alia, 2004). The adherence to truth and objectivity meant that masses consuming news were able to shift right or wrong if they were provided with facts or objectively presented information. The decline of the traditional doctrine on news objectivity to where it is today is said to be too demanding an ideal for journalism (Ward, 2011). According to the Media Council of Kenya (Media act, 2007) all journalists ought to seek truth and report it objectively. During the gathering of news, journalists should apply confidentiality, respect people's opinions and avoid bias reporting. Truth involves basing a story on solid evidence, it has adequate and relevant information to enable the consumer to make informed decisions. Kenyan

journalists have been accused of professional indecency in the discharge of their duties. The ethical shortcomings are summed up well by Kadhi (1999) who says that they lack professionalism and disseminate unverified news or partisan news. Similarly, the print media in Kenya has been accused of observing silence over certain happenings while being irresponsible and reckless in reporting. Kadhi (1999) calls on journalists to consider all encompassing truth in the gathering and packing print news stories for dissemination to the public. This truth will assist a journalist to accumulate data to represent reality of what has happened. This will further help the audience perceive the truth in the story objectively without undue influence from the author. In the spirit of truthfulness, facts will not be considered as weapons to attack or harm the other. Instead they are turned into tools which journalists and the audience enter each other's space of what constitutes basic truth.

2.2. Social Responsibility

Journalists are socially responsible for all the products they churn for consumption to the media. Media ethics is not so much based on normative principles but focused on social responsibility. Kyale 2007 says that concept of responsibility in media ethics refers to the responsibility upon journalists to create an authentic representation of reality. Journalists have a social responsibility to educate the public about events and issues and how they affect their lives. Mbeke (2010) says that journalists interview expert sources, search public records and visit scenes to bring real time news stories. The concept of social responsibility allows total press freedom but government by external controls. Social responsibility supports individual journalist's rights and autonomy but at the same time recognizes the government as the controlling factor in news reporting. Therefore, Paasch (2009) notes that under the banner of social responsibility, freedom of the press is not absolute right. The media can report news without censorship. However, the content should be subject for discussion, scrutiny and review by the public. Alia (2004) says that in seeking to clarify what it means for the press to be socially responsible; positive reportage on the print media can have profound influence pegged on specialized topics such as health reporting and the impact they can have on the lives of its citizens. Conversely, inaccurate reporting can wreak untold havoc and cause untold suffering to the citizenry.

2.3. Self-regulation

According to McQuail (2005), 'historically, the state has often been perceived as the main enemy of freedom of individual expression, while at the same time it has also become, through constitutions and legal systems, the effective guarantor of freedom in important respects.' This statement underscores that there is much controversy on self-regulation. This stems from the journalists' role regarding the level of involvement that regulatory instances should have in guaranteeing that the media carries out its social responsibilities. On the same score, different views of the debate rotate around the axis from self-regulation to formal regulation. Regardless of whether the government imposed public interests are constitutional, the print media has an ethical obligation to serve the public interest and make a positive contribution to the democratic process (Alia, 2004). Mayring (2003) argues that self-regulation is effective depending on the individual journalist or the media organization and lies at the mercy of the media professionals' consciences. The Media Council of Kenya is a structured regulatory body constituted to monitor media activities. The basis of self-censorship in journalism lies in the existence of ethical codes, whose impact on journalistic ethical standards in media organizations remains largely questionable. Paasch (2009) questions the reliability of ethical practices that are guaranteed by written ethical codes for journalism. This scholar laments that professional codes of journalism ethics have become popular among news organizations as a demonstration of their accountability to society. However, Kyale (2007) says that reliance on codes generates significant suspicion that they are often used to merely put a veneer over questionable conduct. The implementation and effectiveness of Kenyan media ethical codes in practice depends on an individual journalist's attention to the significance of ethical reporting.

2.4. Media Independence

An independent media refers to any form of media such as radio, television, newspapers or the internet that is free of influence by the government, religion or corporate interests (Paasch, 2009). As a normative ideal, media independence is free from state control, market forces or mainstream conventions. Keeble (2009) says that media organizations and actors seek to bolster their legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the audiences, peers as well as policy makers. Keeble (2009) discloses that media independence relates to autonomy, self-government or the right of an institution to make its own rules and administer its own business. Media independence is also closely intertwined with other basic ideals of the liberal and democratic understanding of media's role in society. These roles include freedom of press, critique of power, media as the fourth estate and journalists' watchdog role. Media legislation in Kenya does not include provisions that would address editorial independence from the publisher, journalist or owner. Media freedom and the independence of media systems are intrinsically linked to the idea of democratic media. Media Act (2007) notes that there is broad consensus that the media constitute the principal means through which individuals and groups obtain information and impart opinions and ideas to a wider audience. The Kenyan Media Act (2007) notes that uncovering the truth through the provision of accurate and impartial information and facilitating public discourse in the interest of democratic government have often been emphasized as rationales for safeguarding the freedom of speech of the media. In Kenya, freedom of speech is recognized in the constitution as enshrined in the Media Act 2007. Despite existing safeguards for free speech and media freedom, media activity in Kenya faces a variety of constraints. Mbeke (2010) says that these restraints undermine the ability of the media to fulfill their democratic functions. Print media output and behavior in Kenya is affected by political influence, commercialization and financial limitations. Thus, in the print media industry in

this country, undue pressures from the world of politics and business interests influence the ways in which media policies are shaped and implemented. These pressures can thwart the ability of the media policies to promote free and independent media in Kenya.

3. Conclusion

Journalists are supposedly the initial gatekeepers in news gathering, packaging and dissemination as well as custodians of media freedom in Kenya. They have a responsibility to adhere to journalistic ethics as prescribed in the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya. In this study, I examined the extent to which journalists adhere to the code of conduct packaging news for public consumption. The Social Responsibility Theory was situated in this study providing the theoretical framework to determine journalists' levels of adherence to media ethics. In view of the findings, a section of print media practitioners deviated from ethical principles contained in the Media Act 2007. Efforts towards ensuring self-regulation have been enhanced by the elevation of the Media Council of Kenya. The Council is an independent regulatory body that guides, monitors and cracks the whip on errant journalists and media houses. However, there is need to strengthen in-house Ombudsman to monitor media ethics adherence by journalists. All trained journalists exhibited awareness of ethical principles as stipulated in the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya. However, in some occasions, sub-editors, who are gatekeepers, can incorporate a few changes on the copy to meet the needs of their audiences and align them to in-house writing styles. This slant ultimately affects the product which may deviate from journalistic ethics.

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