ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Ethical Issues in Reporting Political Defections in Nigeria: An Assessment of Political Influence on Journalists in Lagos

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Abstract

Long before the 2015 general election in Nigeria, the political scene was popular for party mergers and alliances. The 2015 general election unraveled a new trend of massive defections of politicians from one political party to another. This unprecedented action set a new impetus for journalists as they have to constantly report defections of politicians and their supporters from one political party to another. As the 2019 general election drew nearer, there were some news reportage on political activities across the country which were criticized by observers and politicians who believe journalists were being biased in news reportage of political defections. Upon this background, this study attempts to ascertain if journalism ethics in reporting political activities are being violated by reporters. The mass media judgmental theory (normative theory) of Social Responsibility theory was reviewed in this study to help understand journalists' actions in the news reportage of political defection. A survey of practising journalists in Lagos was conducted to ascertain this point. Using a non-probability sampling technique- snow balling, a total of 100 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to journalists. The results were presented in frequency tables. The findings showed that journalists are aware of this unethical practice of biased reportage of political defections, though some of them are not certain if their editors edit stories in favour or against political parties. The study recommends that, considering the effort biased political reports had caused in the past, ethical issues in political reportage take critical **discourse** by concerned bodies.

Keywords: ethics, cross-carpeting, political party, teleological, deontological

Introduction

Long before the 2015 general election in Nigeria, the political scene was popular for party mergers and alliances. The 2015 general election unraveled a new trend of massive defections of politicians from one political party to another (Vanguardng.com, 2018). This unprecedented action set a new impetus for journalists as they have to constantly report defections of politicians and their supporters from one political party to another. This is not an entirely new trend in the political scene as we have seen similar occurrences in the First and Second republics in Nigeria. The First Republic, for instance, saw the feud between Ladoke Akintola and Obafemi Awolowo who struggled for leadership of the Action Group (AG). Ladoke Akintola, the Premier of the western region, formed a new party and aligned with the Northern People's Congress (NPC). Likewise in the Second Republic, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo merged their parties to form a new coalition.

However, the massive defection of politicians from one party to another was unprecedented in the history of our nation. In 2013, five governors (from Adamawa, Kano, Kwara, River, and Sokoto), 37 representatives and 11 senators left the PDP and joined the All Progressives Congress (APC), giving life to a newly created opposition party (Barnes, 2018). The trend which resurfaced in 2013 has become an idea which politicians toy with and the media were busy reporting. In the midst of all the political defections happening since that time, journalists have been in the field writing in support or against some political parties by framing actions and writing news slants as they pleased (Rasaq, 2016, p.68).In the long run, the news slant and reportage on the defection popularly referred to as cross-carpeting and other political issues became unreliable as many journalists crossed the ethical

line to present biased stories of the political issues (Oboh, 2016, p.94;Rasaq, 2016, p.68).

Reporting biased stories on political defection from one party to another does not only show how deeply media have been proliferated by impostors, but also shows how bad things have turned on the media scene. Oboh (2016) believes that the media, which are hitherto known as a non-partisan organ of the society and a reliable mouthpiece of the masses, have once again come close to being a source of mass destruction in our society. Massive unethical practices like biased reportage on party defections are not appropriate for the industry. Doing such is costing journalism a lot. We are not only losing the sanctity of this profession, but also losing our dignity in the society. While people watch these unethical and debasing practices happening in the media industry, they started losing hope in the entire societal system (Rasaq, 2016)because people see the mass media as their platform for counter government false activities. In the advanced societies where the media is held in high esteem, for example the United States to be precise, people watch in disgust as a respected cable television CNN (Cable News Network) shamelessly antagonize the incumbent president. In what some considered abuse of function, the cable television openly engages in anti-Trump reportage, analysis, and editorials on the president. This hitherto respected cable news television deliberately twists and exaggerates any event coming from the incumbent president, all in a bid to discredit the man. Unfortunately, the resultant effect of CNN's aggressive and biased actions is causing the media its credibility (Knight Foundation, 2018; Hetherington & Ladd, 2020).Those citizens who objectively follow political development are losing trust in the media generally (Brenan, 2019).

In Nigeria, the huge number of political defectors was largely coloured in the media by owners who supported various parties. Some notable Nigerian organisations defiantly present their affiliated parties as gaining popular support than other political parties (Udende, Rasaq, Mahamood, Abubakar, Adegoke, Abdulah, Ahmad, Bajuri, Ahmad, & Hussin, 2017, pp.2034-236). In the print realm, papers like the *Nation* Newspaper is notorious for overblowing defection stories in favour of the All Progressives Party, APC. The Africa Independent Television(AIT) and Raypower FM which are owned by Raymond Dokpesi, pro-PDP (Peoples Democratic Party), craft stories, editorials, news commentaries and analyses in their support (Aljazeera.com, 2019). In the broadcast filed, the African Independent Television (AIT) is reputed as an unofficial organ of the PDP. The Television Continental (TVC) is not only identified with the APC, but is owned and run by the party's national leader, Bola Ahmed Tinubu (Punchng.com, 2017). By implication, all journalists working for these media houses are usually sympathetic to the cause of their affiliated parties.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are

1. To ascertain the veracity of the claim that many journalists contravene journalism ethics in their reportage of political defection.
2. To find out if journalism ethics are observed by journalists in reporting political defection.
3. To find out if media reports on political defection are influenced by a third-party.
4. To ascertain if the agencies regulating journalism ethical issues monitor political reports as expected of them.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What is the veracity of the claim that many journalists contravene journalism ethics in their reportage of political defection?
2. Do journalists really observe the ethical guidelines when reporting political defections?
3. Are media reports on political defection in Nigeria influenced by a third-party?
4. Does the national agency regulating journalism ethical guidelines monitor political reportage in the country?

Literature Review

The Role of Journalists in the Society

Journalists' social responsibilities to the public include promoting peace, cohesion and stability by disseminating factual and relevant information to the public. Part of the journalist's job is to educate the populace on unusual information and occurrences. Osungbohun (1998, p.2), while emphasizing the task of journalists, noted that in order to advance a developing country, there is need for a brand of journalism that can effectively mobilize the people for greater social political, economic and technological development. He cited the fact that journalism has been a veritable tool which nationalists have used in Nigeria, Africa and other countries of the world to fight for various causes. For example, nationalists like Nnamdi Azikiwe used the *West African Pilot* and Obafemi Awolowo used the *Nigerian Tribune* to propagate their political views on the need for total independence of Nigeria, during the colonial period. "They launched campaigns against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. These two newspapers and others like them adopted the same strategies to fight for independence" (Osungbohun, 1998).

Like other professionals, journalists also derailed and practised what is viewed as ill-practice. Even the nationalists praised for their dogged struggles committed blunder and sometimes engaged in unethical practices. The Nigerian polity which started as a concerted effort by various nationalists from different regions of the country soon took a new turn as ethnic and regional rivalry became the order of the day. Oboh (2014, p.2) writes that unfortunately "this division did not end within the confines of the political arena; it also crept into the operation and activities of the Nigerian press." Oboh clearly points out how early party leaders, who also owned the press of that time, used their newspapers as mouthpieces of their parties to launch attack against their political opponents. "The newspapers became a platform for their electioneering campaign and attack against their rivals." He also stated that due to the interference by the newspaper proprietors in the activities of the media, the Nigerian journalists were no longer able to take an objective position to report on public issues, during their time. Media scholars like Sambe (2005 as cited by Oboh, 2014) traced the root cause of the Nigerian civil war to journalist's bias on news report by their use of inflammatory reports by Nigerian journalists who were heavily bias in their reports. Sambe observes that shortly before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1966, the media began to sing discordant tunes (Sambe, 2005,p.154 as cited by Oboh, 2014, p.3). Though used by politicians, the mass media contributed to the breakdown of order and the subsequent civil war in Nigeria, as scholars have observed. This must not repeat itself.

Journalists and Mass Media Ethics

This discourse is not entirely new as media ethics have been a major debate in the academia for long. It is important to note that the issue of journalism ethics is very dicey. It may appear easier at the mere mention of it, but scholarly discourse has proven otherwise. While ethics is a very important matter in every profession, it may not be effective until it is made a law. This could be translated to mean that, not until ethical codes are clearly stated in law, it has no effective power. Nwanne (2016, p.152) analysed definitions of ethics. His first choice was from the Advanced Learner's Dictionary which defines the term as "moral behaviour such in professional or business ethics. From his analysis, we gathered that ethics is more of moral character or norms respected by people. This has no legal binding as it is only cherished and accepted by the group who place a premium on such values. Journalistic ethics, for example, are the moral philosophy about what an ideal practice should be; they are not legally stated but encouraged for practitioners to adopt. While everyone may agree that media ethics are good and necessary for our profession, we must realise that it need to be entrenched into law to be effective. Hasan (2014, p.576) clearly acknowledges this fact when she wrote that media ethics constitutes a normative science of conduct and

must therefore be 'applied voluntarily'. She believe ethics should set guidelines, rules, norms, codes and principles that will lead journalists and all other media workers to make moral decisions. "They should not be forced to do so because ethics is applied voluntarily."

Nwanne (2016, p.155) writes that while laws have the backing of the state and violations are usually punished, ethics may not always be state-backed and, as such, violations may not attract sanctions by government. He added that a breach of ethics is often viewed seriously 'only' by the concerned professional body. At times law and ethical questions appear on either sides, take for instance the principle of journalism which forbids reporters from disclosing their sources (sensitive and vulnerable source) and the law which demands that the reporter disclose its source or risk going to jail. And then, there is the Anton Piller Order. These reveal how porous the issue of media ethics is. The case of objectivity in journalism practice is also a big debate as the idea has people in support and those against how it should be applied. Some philosophers believe that objectivity is relative and has no definite place (Hackett, 1984 as cited by Nwanne, 2016). However, we are not insinuating that things should be left the way they are. We are calling for a more critical effort towards solving this benign issue which may soon end in a catastrophe. This discourse must focus on legal measures and steps to take in making corrective engagements against erring journalists. It is pertinent to preserve the sanctity of the journalism profession and safeguard the nation. The careless and unethical practice will not only cause damage to the profession but can cause civil and social tremor.

Research Methodology

The method adopted for this study is survey and the preferred technique is snow balling. Rather than question every journalist in the country, a representative sample of people was chosen and the findings were generalized to the larger population. This sample is taken from journalists in Lagos, where major national dailies have bureaus. The city is a pot pourri of media houses owned by government, individuals, religious and business groups. This made it easy to find an array of journalists from different backgrounds. It is also difficult to find reporters in their offices due to the nature of their jobs as they are meant to wander around town to gather reports. Thus, spots where corps of reporters can be located such as Lagos State Government House, Alausa, and Ikeja were used. Every major media house has correspondents there. The national stadium at Surulere is also another spot for journalists to hang out, so they were met in the field. A fourteen item questionnaire was designed with two parts: section A contains bio-data of the respondent and section B highlights relevant questions on the topic of discourse. A total of hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed in the field and eighty four copies were returned, duly filled.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Responsibility Theory is one of the key normative mass media theories, when viewed from the journalistic point of view. Thus, it provides the theoretical parameters upon which this paper is based.

The Social Responsibility Press Theory

This theory emerged in the United States in the twentieth century. The excesses by some journalists in the exercise of press freedom made the United States Government establish the Hutchins Commission in 1947 to review the concept of a free press (Oboh, 2014, p.41) Having realized that the market (open market place of ideas) had failed to fulfill the promise that press freedom would reveal the truth, 'Commission on Freedom of the Press' provided a model in which the media had certain obligations to society. These obligations were expressed in the words: informative, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance. The goal of the social responsibility system is that media as a whole is pluralized, indicating 'a reflection of the diversity of society as well as access to various points of view'. The journalist is accountable to his audience

as well as to the government. This theory puts the media and the government on the same level, signifying an interaction where both parts are allowed to criticize the other. Many see the social responsibility theory is an extension of the libertarian theory because the press recognizes that it has a responsibility to society to carry out its essential functions. The social responsibility theory ascribes basically the same six functions to the press as the libertarian theory:

a. Providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs.
b. Instructing and informing the public to make it capable of self-government.
c. Protecting the rights of the individual against the government through its watchdog function.
d. Maintaining the economic equilibrium of the system by bringing together buyer, seller and advertiser.
e. Providing entertainment.
f. Remaining independent of outside pressures by maintaining its own economic self-sufficiency.

The basic principles of the social responsibility theory uphold conflict resolution through discussion; there is high regard for public opinion, consumer action, and professional ethics and jealous guard over private rights and important social interests. Based on the assumption that media serve essential functions in society, it is expected that the media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to the society. And in accepting and discharging these obligations, the media should be self-regulatory within the framework of law and established institutions. In the public interest, the media should underplay that news which might lead to crime, violence, and social tension or cause offence to ethnic or religious minorities. The media should be pluralist, should reflect the diversity of their society and allow access to various points of view, including the right to reply.

The UNESCO sponsored international commission for the study of communication problems in the early seventies. This report reveals a whole lot. The limited application of the four established theories of the press to the third world countries, which are vastly different from each other and also from western countries, led to the birth of a new approach whereby communication is used to carry out development tasks.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The questions drawn are presented and interpreted in frequency tables as shown below.

Distributed copies	100	100%
Returned copies	84	84%
Percentage	84%	

84 of the hundred copies of questionnaire administered in the field were duly filed and returned, making it 84% response rate.

Table 1. Gender

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Male	57	68%
Female	27	32%
Total	84	100%

68% of the respondents are male while 32% are females.

Table 2: Age bracket

Years	Frequency	Percentage
16-20	3	4%
21-25	6	7%
26-30	12	14%
31 above	63	75%
Total	84	100%

75% of the respondents are above 31 year old, 14% fall within 26-30 age bracket, 7% fall within 21-25 years, while 4% falls between 16-20 years.

Table 3: Religion of Respondents

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Islam	30	36%
Christianity	42	50%
Traditional	0	0
Worship	12	14%
Others	84	100%

50% of the respondents professed Christianity, 36% professed Islam why 14 kept their belief system away from public discourse.

Table 4: Organisation of Respondents

Media	Frequency	Percentage
Print	33	39%
Broadcast	51	61%
Online	0	0
Freelance	0	0
Total	84	100%

61% of the respondents work in broadcast media organisations and 38% of them work in print media.

Table 5: Media House Ownership Distribution

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Government	36	43%
Private	48	57%
A Group	0	0
Total	84	100 %

57% of the journalists work for private organizations; 36% work for government owned media houses.

Table 6: Did you study journalism or related course in school before practising?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	75	89%
No	9	11%
Don't know	0	0
Total	84	100 %

89% of the journalists studied journalism and related courses in school; 11% did not study the course in school.

Table 7: Are you aligned to any political party in the country?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	12	14%
No	69	82%
Don't know	3	4%
Total	84	100 %

82% of journalists are not aligned to any political party in the country; 14% do while 4% hide their personal relations with political parties.

Table 8: Is the media house you work for influenced by any political party?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	27	32%
No	51	61%
Don't know	6	7%
Total	84	100 %

Most of the reporters believe their media houses are not influenced by any political party; 32% believe it to be so while 7% could not tell.

Table 9: Do you believe that most mass media organizations contravene journalism ethical guidelines in their political defection reports?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	39	46%
No	30	36%
Don't know	15	18%
Total	84	100 %

46% of journalists agreed that media organisations contravene journalism ethical guidelines in their political defection reports; 36% disagreed while 18% could not tell.

Table 10: Do you believe that most mass media reportage on political defection are biased in favour of or against certain political party?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	33	39%
No	33	39%
Don't know	18	21%
Total	84	99 %

39% of the journalists believe mass media reportage are biased in favour of or against certain political party; 39% ticked no while 21% could not tell.

Table 12: The institutional agencies empowered by law to regulate journalism practice in Nigeria are not closely monitoring political reportage.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
True	48	57%
False	30	36%
Don't know	6	7%
Total	84	101%

57% of the respondents believe the agencies empowered by law to regulate journalism practice in Nigeria are not closely monitoring political coverage; 36% believe that is a false statement while 7% could not tell.

Table 13: The media house I work for is affiliated to a political group

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	9	11%
No	66	79%
Don't know	9	11%
Total	84	101 %

79% of the journalists ticked no when asked if their media houses are affiliated to any political party; 11% affirm the affiliation while 11% don't know.

Table 14: Public agencies who should monitor political reportage are loyal to incumbent political party in power, as such turn deaf ears to biased reports on defection stories.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	36	43%
No	24	29%
Don't know	24	29%
Total	84	100 %

43%of the respondents believed that public agencies monitoring political reportage are loyal to the incumbent party; those who ticked no and don't know are 29% respectively.

Table 15: I'm aware my editors edit reporter's stories on candidate defections to favour some political parties.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	9	11%
No	60	71%
Don't know	15	18%
Total	84	100 %

When asked if the reporters are aware their editors edit their stories on defection in favour of some

political parties, 71% of them ticked no, 11% ticked yes while 18% ticked don't know.

Discussion of Findings

Research question 1*: What is the veracity of the claim that many journalists contravene journalism ethics in their reportage of political defection?* From the data gathered in table 9 it is clear that most journalists do not observe the ethical guidelines. Information obtained showed that 46% of journalists agreed that media organisations contravene journalism ethical guidelines in their political defection reports, 36% disagreed while 18% could not tell.

Research question 2*: Do journalists really observe the ethical guidelines when reporting political defections?* From the data gathered in table 9 it is clear that most journalists do not observe the ethical guidelines. Information obtained showed that 46% of journalists agreed that media organisations contravene journalism ethical guidelines in their political defection reports, 36% disagreed while 18% could not tell.

Research question 3: *Are media reports on political defection in Nigeria influenced by a third-party?* From data gathered in the table 10, there is strong indication that a third party has influence, covertly or overtly, on political reportage in news. 39% of the journalists believe mass media reportage is biased in favour of or against certain political party, 39% ticked no while 21% could not tell.

Research question 4: *Does the national agency regulating journalism ethical guidelines monitor political reportage in the country?* It is a clear indication that the institutional agencies saddled with the responsibility of monitoring political reportage are not doing that as expected. Though, this may appear differently to the public, journalists know the truth. Table 12 shows that 57% of the respondents believe the agencies empowered by law to regulate journalism practice in Nigeria are not closely monitoring political coverage, 36% believe that is a false statement while 7% could not tell. Also, table 14 reveals that 43%of the respondents believed that public agencies monitoring political reportage are loyal to incumbent party in power; those who ticked no and don't know are 29% respectively.

From the above findings, it could be deduced that the image of the journalism profession is at stake and efforts must be made by journalists to salvage it before the society give up on them. The damage biased reportage of political defection will cause to this profession might be irreparable; hence, a serious and urgent step must be taken to stop the proliferation of mass media practice by political elements. Nigerians must learn from the past and avoid a repeat of the catastrophe which marred the Nigerian First Republic (Sambe, 2005; Oboh, 2014). We have advanced beyond the style of politics played by our early nationalists six decades ago. Other nations are looking up to us mostly for what nature has bequeathed us. Thus, we must set good standards and redeem our image. If we had failed before, we must not fail again.

The issue of mass media sociology should be brought to the fore and discussed by concerned bodies. Government officials, media scholars and researchers, business moguls, non-governmental organisations and other groups must take up this as a matter of priority. They all have to encourage the establishment of media houses which will be owned by non-politicians and completely devoid of political affiliation of any sort. The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) model should be studied to see how Nigerian major mass media establishments could be owned by the people. A media established by public trust in Nigeria will greatly reduce the influence and control of the press by politicians and unethical businessmen.

We must admit that it is a futile expectation to believe that media agencies like National Broadcasting Commission NBC and others will monitor media house for unethical issues like biased reportage on party defections. These agencies are established and run by the government, thus any political party in power owns and controls the staff, so objectivism can never be guaranteed. They will naturally turn deaf ears against unethical reportage, when such story is in favour of the ruling party, regardless of the damage

to other parties. With years in the media industry in Nigeria, we have seen that most of the privately owned media houses could barely survive; as a result, the managements find it difficult to pay staff regularly. Lots of local media houses owe their staff for many months and will pay for only one month after four or five months of working (this is another topic of discussion). The low patronage and stiff competition in the mass media business have forced many proprietors to align themselves with political parties and the government. This seems to be the easiest means for them to survive by running paid-for news on behalf of government and promoting only government sides of stories. Another way to curb this harmful tide is for government to give grants to all media outlets.

Recommendations

In consideration of the findings, the following recommendations are therefore made:

1. Just like other scholars have pointed out, obeying professional ethics is crucial to the survival of a media house and the reputation of journalists must be protected. Akinsuli and Dipo-Adedoyin (2018, p.8) warns that a media house will lose credibility if it continues to publish plagiarized or distorted stories. They believe that such a media organisation will eventually lose patronage and is bound to fold up. We must speak up to protect the profession's ethical guidelines every time.
2. It is clear that the media has a powerful influence on the thinking and conduct of the people. Journalists must use this privilege with caution because societal peace, development and stability are affected by their professional conduct.
3. Though we didn't discuss the issue of journalists' well-being and remuneration extensively, it is the underlying factor which compels most journalists to overlook ethical issues in the field. This is a benign situation which has affected the Nigerian media system. Poor remuneration for journalists has greatly contributed to them breaking ethical standards over and over. Akinsuli and Dipo-Adedoyin (2018) believe that ethics cannot thrive in an empty stomach and that hash living conditions generate survival tactics that negate morality. We highly recommend that journalists' well-being be improved on, because they will naturally resort to dirty survival tactics to make ends meet.
4. Existentially, the media is an essential part of modern society. Baran and Davis (2012, p.130) described the media as the Fourth Estate and explained that the media is an independent social institution that ensures that other institutions serve the public. If media practitioners must fulfil this unalienable function in the society, then they must do it with probity. Accountability must start with media practitioners.

Conclusion

Mass media ethics are codes which must be treated as sacred because they serve higher purpose in the society. However, this study has once again raised alarm on the consequences biased mass media reportage by journalist can cause in our society. Considering the loopholes and weaknesses of ethics, scholars of journalism and journalists must make effort to discourage biased reportage on political defections. And one important way to resolve this challenge is to put the welfare of our journalists as a matter of priority. We must ensure that they are well remunerated and mobilized to do their job, to avoid temptation of quick gratification.

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