

Rethinking Balance and Fairness as Journalistic Ethical Precepts: A Survey of Journalists in Southeast, Nigeria

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Abstract

In journalism practice, professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. Balance and fairness are imperative when reporting and many ethical consequences can arise from not being balance or fair. This study examined balance and fairness as journalistic ethical precepts in Southeast Nigeria. The study was anchored on the social responsibility theory and the deontological theory of ethics. The survey method was adopted; the study has a sample size of 274 which was arrived at using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size formula/table. The proportionate and purposive sampling technique was used while questionnaire served as the instrument of data collection. Findings revealed that at an average mean of 3.7 (N=271), the respondents understand the precepts of balance and fairness in news reportage. It was also revealed that the extent to which they apply balance and fairness in their news reportis very low. Result further revealed that at an average mean of 3.7 (N=271), the respondents agreed that balance and fairness should still remain the watchdog of journalists during news reporting. The study concludes that balance and fairness should always be the guiding principle in news reporting no matter whose ox is gored and the precepts should always be embraced and upheld by journalists for a professional journalism practice or there should be rethinking of the concept to suite the current trend. The study amongst others, recommended that journalists should endeavour to observe and apply the code of professional journalistic ethics in the discharge of their professional duties for better journalism practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Journalism, Ethical precepts, Balance and Fairness

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I. Introduction

The Hutchins Commission brought about the need for journalist to be self-regulated as against the positions of laws upon journalistic practice (Shedden, 2015). This commission therefore brought about ethical precepts upon which journalist are expected to be guided. Common among this practices are the ethical precepts of balance and fairness (Nigerian Press Council).

According to Abbey (2021) balance and fairness is a classical journalism ethics which ensures an attempt to present all sides of a story accurately without slanting a story so that a reader draws the reporter desired conclusion. Waber (2015) observed that some media houses appear to offer less thoroughly fair and balance coverage as the server audiences, claiming that this audience prefer to have their biases reinforce in the media. This means that some members of the audience are already bias in their thinking and turn to the media to help them enforce that bias. On this premise maintaining balance and fairness becomes a very big situation. In the case of election coverage is difficult for media outfit to effectively coverall parties in the election as a way of maintaining balance and fairness rather coverage is going to political heavy weight and large political parties.

It is situation like this that calls for the rethinking of the ethical precepts of balance and fairness. Most local tabloids appear to lean towards a particular bias when reporting their stories (Lumen, 2021). Consideration are not given to all parties in give story thereby making their story one sided. Although this study is not about citizen journalism or online journalism but a little peep into that area will review that their stories are usually one-sided or slanted. This is also what we see when journalist cover elections or activities of political parties or the government in power. This study therefore seeks to examine the need to rethink the ethical precepts of balance and fairness in today's journalistic practices.

Most trained journalists are not ignorant of the journalistic precept of balance and fairness. However, notall practicing journalists in Nigeria are well trained in the field of communication and as such may not be at home with the rudiments of balance and fairness. Another challenge is the fact that political reporting, advocating reporting and reporting the rich have a way of affecting the idea of balance and fairness.

A cursory look at the stories in the media (legacy media and new media) seems to have revealed instances of slanted stories. There are stories on new media that appear to negate the concepts of balance and fairness? Or that the ethical principle of balance and fairness is no longer fashionable to be respected? Or that journalists are not well trained?

The major objective of this study is to examine the need to rethink the ethical precepts of balance and fairness in contemporary media practice in Nigeria.

Other specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Ascertain the extent to which ethical precepts of balance and fairness is understood by journalists in southeast Nigeria.
2. Determine the extent to which southeast journalists apply balance and fairness in their news reports.
3. Examine the extent to which balance and fairness should continue to be an ethical precept in journalism practice in southeast Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions

1. To what extent do South-East journalists understand the idea of balance and fairness?
2. To what extent do South-East journalists apply balance and fairness in their news reports?
3. To what extent should balance and fairness continue to be an ethical precept in journalism practice in South-East Nigeria?

Ethical Precepts in Journalism

Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. The Society of Professional Journalists (2021) believes that public enlightenment is a forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Furthermore, ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. SPJ declared four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media. These principles are: Seek Truth and Report it, Minimize Harm, Act Independently, and Be Accountable and Transparent.

Anim, (2006) as cited in Akpan and Onyebuchi, (2012) holds that the concept of objectivity in the business of news gathering has become rather contentious among communication scholars. This is because of the view by some media scholars which Akpan and Onyebuchi (2012) subscribe to, that the very idea of story selection from among the very many events that occur in a day is fraught with subjectivity. They said—we cannot deny that some stories in the mass media lack objectivity.

On the other hand, Ekwueme (2009, p.9) argued that “The penchant for the Nigerian mass media especially the news magazines to eulogize and chant the praise songs of some non-performing governors to the chagrin of the masses”. To him, the constant sing of the praises of governors not minding the peoples believe in the contrary is on its own subjective and not objective.

According to Allentcott (2016), balance, in the journalistic context means that journalists have a responsibility to be objective irrespective of personal opinions and offer a mix of views to remain impartial on a matter which allows the readers make their own judgements from the selection of varied news points maintains the balance of a story as the public are not being swayed towards a particular conclusion from just one biased.

Empirical Review

Edegho and Ude-Akpeh (2016) in their study titled “Ethical Standards of Fairness and Objectivity and Journalism Practice in Nigeria”, with the adoption of the survey methodology, found out that most journalists in Nigeria observe journalistic ethics of fairness and objectivity in their professional practice. It also showed that the observance of ethical standards by journalists was not at all times. Their investigation went further to reveal that privately owned media workers were more forthright in observing ethical principles of fairness and objectivity (particularly in political electioneering campaign reports) than government-owned media workers.

In a contrary position, Geremew (2014) carried out a study “Challenges in practicing objectivity and other ethical issues in news reporting”, which aims to explore journalists' view on factors that affect their implementation of objectivity and other ethical issues in the context of the Oromia Broadcasting Network using the qualitative approach (in-depth-interview). The result of his investigation indicated that objectivity and other ethical issues in the OBN were given less attention in the news gathering, processing and reporting because of three major factors. The result was further elaborated thus; The first one is professional issues that emanate from the shortage of journalistic trained manpower and lack of journalists' independence; The other one is pressure groups that directly or indirectly affect objectivity and other ethical issues; and the final one is the issues of news verification and selection of credible sources.

Corroborating the finding of Geremew (2014), Akpan, Anorue, Obayi, Onyebuchi and Anorue (2012) in their study “Rethinking Objectivity in News Reporting in the Digital Age” which aims at finding out whether online versions of news stories are objective and to also ascertain the effect of lack of news objectivity on online

news reporting using the survey research design found that most online news stories are not objectively reported.

Supporting the above results, Wahl-Jorgensen, Berry, Garcia-Blanco, Bennett and Cabe(2017) carried out an investigation titled “Rethinking balance and impartiality in journalism: How the BBC attempted and failed to change the paradigm”. The result of their investigation indicated that in the case of the BBC, it is principally put into practice through juxtaposing the positions of the two main political parties – Conservative and Labour. On this basis, the article develops the idea of the ‘paradigm of impartiality-as-balance.’ This paradigm prevails despite the news organization’s commitment to representing a broader range of opinion. The paradigm of impartiality-as-balance means that only a narrow range of views and voices are heard on the most contentious and important issues.

Similarly, Weber (2015) in his article “Teaching Fairness in Journalism: A Challenging Task” which sought to examine the techniques for both teaching fairness and for evaluating bias with the adoption of survey method, positioned that the average degree of fairness rose slightly, but that the average degree of bias also rose slightly. Furthermore, the median amount of fairness declined and the median degree of bias rose.

Coming from a different angle, Rishante (2014) in his study titled “Objectivity in television news reportage: An evaluation of “Occupy Nigeria Movement” (Oil Subsidy Protest)” which -rayed to identify the extent to which news objectivity is reliable and credible with a reason to expose the factors that affect news objectivity adopting the survey methodology indicated that television news reportage can be achieved only if the reporters observe their journalistic ethical guidelines, and are also allowed practice free without interference from media owners and government.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on social responsibility theory and the deontological theory of ethics.

The Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory was propounded by Theodore Peterson, Fred’s. Siebert & Wilbur Schramm in 1963. This theory was born out of problems occasioned by its antecedent. According to Okunna and Omenugha (2012), the fundamental doctrine of this theory is that the press should be free to perform the functions which the libertarian theory granted it freedom to perform, but that this freedom should be exercised with responsibility. If the media fails to meet their responsibilities to society, the social responsibility theory holds that the government should encourage the media to comply by way of controlling them.

Moemeka (1991), expounded that the social responsibility theory places due emphasis on the moral and social responsibilities of persons who, and institution which, operate the mass media. Thus, it suffices to say that the theory bothers on journalistic ethics and its introduction heralded professional journalistic associations who have self-formulated codes of ethics and official journalistic standard designed to encourage responsible behavior by their members.

This theory is relevant to the study under investigation because it emphasizes the need for the media practitioners to be ethical in the discharge of their duties. The responsibility of the press is to the people and society in general. Being bias in reporting will kill the trust and confidence of the people towards the media.

Deontological Theory of Ethics

This theory was propounded by W.D Ross in 1877 and was first used in a book named *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, published in 1930, authored by Charlie Dunbar Broad (1887-1971). The theory is usually referred to as duty or obligation-based theory. Deontologists believe that people are difficult, bound to act out of respect for law and order and not just because of the consequences of their action (Akakwandu, 2013). This theory is also relevant to the study in that it revealed that journalists are usually afraid of the law rather than the consequences of their actions. This means that journalists are expected to act responsibly in order not to be embarrassed by the law.

Research Methodology

The study adopted the survey method. The survey method was chosen because it was considered appropriate as it involves sampling of opinion of Southeast journalists. Population of the study comprised registered journalists practicing in the five (5) states of eastern Nigeria. According to the secretariat of the Nigerian Union of Journalist in the various States of the Eastern region, the number of registered journalists is nine hundred and eighty-three (983) from the 5 states. The broken down of the number is as follows: Imo -141, Abia - 120, Anambra – 352, Enugu – 150 and Ebonyi- 220. Therefore, the total population of the study is $141 + 120 + 352 + 150 + 220 = 983$. The sample size of 274 was arrived at using (Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size formula/table,

Proportionate and purposive sampling technique was adopted for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents from each of the States. In Imo, 39 respondents were selected, Abia

– 33, Anambra – 98, Enugu – 42 and Ebonyi – 61 respectively. Questionnaire was the instrument for the data collection and it was face validated by two research experts in the field of mass communication. Data collected from the field was presented in tables using numbers, simple percentages and mean analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In the course of this study, 274 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents to fill, out of which 271 (99%) copies were retrieved and found valid. While 3 copies (1%) were nullified as a result of inappropriate responses from respondents, and thus, was found invalid. Data collected from the field was presented in tables using numbers, simple percentages and mean analysis.

Table 1: Respondents’ response on the extent Southeast journalists understand the idea of balance and fairness

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Balance and fairness means news reporting that is free from favoritism.	187	84	-	-	3.7	Accepted
Balance and fairness is the code of conduct that specifies the reportage of both side of the story.	213	58	-	-	3.8	Accepted
I know that balance and fairness require being objective in my news report.	201	70	-	-	3.7	Accepted
Average Mean					3.7	Accepted

Source: Field survey, 2021

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected. Let 1.0-1.5 (Very Low), 1.6-2.2 (Low), 2.3-2.9 (Moderate), 3.0-3.5 (High) and 3.6-4.0 (Very High).

From the analysis of data, result revealed that at an average mean of 3.7 (N=271), the respondents affirmed to understanding the precepts of balance and fairness in news reportage and the extent to which the respondents understand the journalistic ethics of balance and fairness in news reportage is very high. The implication of this finding is that most journalists in southeastern Nigeria are not ignorant of the ethics of balance and fairness.

Table 2: Respondents’ responses on the extent Southeast journalist apply balance and fairness in their news report

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Most journalists do not stick to balance and fairness when reporting political stories and the political parties of their interest.	142	129	-	-	3.5	Accepted
Due to the harsh economy of the country, journalists hardly apply balance and fairness in news stories.	55	20	101	95	2.1	Rejected
Balance and fairness are most times found lacking in news reports due to the acceptance of gratification among journalists	100	128	31	12	3.2	Accepted
Average Mean					2.9	Accepted

Source: Field survey, 2021

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected. Let 1.0-1.5 (Very Low), 1.6-2.2 (Low), 2.3-2.9 (Moderate), 3.0-3.5 (High) and 3.6-4.0 (Very High).

From the analysis of data, result revealed that at an average mean of 2.9 (N=271), the respondents admitted to not adhering to the ethical precepts of balance and fairness in news reportage. The none adherence to balance and farness, which is moderate, is more pronounced when it comes to political reporting and in stories that they have already collected gratification for, especially when the gratification is not for the official purpose of commercializing the news. The implication of this finding is that it reveals the none adherence to the ethics of balance and fairness by journalists in practice.

Table 3: Respondents response on the extent balance and fairness should continue to be an ethical precept in journalism practice in southeast, Nigeria

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
I think balance and fairness should be the watchdog of journalists during news reporting	169	102	-	-	3.6	Accepted
Balance and fairness should always be the guiding principle in news reporting no matter whose ox is gored	155	112	3	1	3.6	Accepted
Journalistic ethics of balance and fairness should always be embraced and upheld by journalists	208	63	-	-	3.8	Accepted
Average Mean					3.7	Accepted

Source: Field survey, 2021

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected. Let 1.0-1.5 (Very Low), 1.6-2.2 (Low), 2.3-2.9 (Moderate), 3.0-3.5 (High) and 3.6-4.0 (Very High).

The analysis of data on the extent balance and fairness should continue to be an ethical precept in journalism practice in Southeast Nigeria revealed that, at an average mean of 3.7 (N=271), the respondents, to a very high extent, agreed that balance and fairness should be the watchdog of journalists during news reporting. Adding that it should always be the guiding principle in news reporting no matter whose ox is gored and that journalists should embrace and uphold the ethics. The implication of this finding is that most of journalist in southeast are of the view that balance and fairness should continue to be a guiding principle for journalistic practice.

II. Discussion of Findings

The Extent Southeast Journalists Understand the Idea of Balance and Fairness

Communicating this findings, result revealed that at an average mean of 3.7 (N=271), the respondents affirmed to understanding the precepts of balance and fairness in news reportage and the extent to which the respondents understand the journalistic ethics of balance and fairness in news reportage is very high. The implication of this finding is that most journalists in southeastern Nigeria are not ignorant of the ethics of balance and fairness. Supporting the result, deontological theory of ethics holds that journalists behaves in a manner he ought to behave. He weighs the intrinsic value of an action before he behaves in a particular way. He behaves in a particular way that aligns with his sense of duty and obligation (Akakwandu, 2013). The social responsibility theory places due emphasis on the moral and social responsibilities of persons who, and institution which, operate the mass media. If the media fails to meet their responsibilities to society, the social responsibility theory holds that the government should encourage the media to comply by way of controlling them.

The Extent Southeast Journalists Apply Balance and Fairness in Their News Report

Result of data analysis indicated that, at an average mean of 2.9 (N=271), the respondents admitted to not adhering to the ethical precepts of balance and fairness in news reportage. The none adherence to balance and farness, which is moderate, is more pronounced when it comes to political reporting and in stories that they have already collected gratification for, especially when the gratification is not for the official purpose of commercializing the news. This finding is in consonance with the findings of Geremew (2014) which indicated that objectivity and other ethical issues in the OBN were given less attention in the news gathering, processing and reporting because of three major factors. In furtherance to the findings of this study, Akpan, Anorue, Obayi, Onyebuchi and Anorue (2012) found that found that most online news stories are not objectively reported. The implication of this finding is that most journalists do not adhere to the ethical precept of balance and fairness.

The Extent Balance and Fairness Should Continue to be an Ethical Precept in Journalism Practice in Southeast Nigeria

The analysis of data on the extent balance and fairness should continue to be an ethical precept in journalism practice in Southeast Nigeria revealed that, at an average mean of 3.7 (N=271), the respondents, to a very high extent, agreed that balance and fairness should be the watchdog of journalists during news reporting. Adding that it should always be the guiding principle in news reporting no matter whose ox is gored and that journalists should embrace and uphold the ethics. This supports the deontological theory of ethics which is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions, as opposed to rightness or wrongness of the consequences of the action. The theory is usually referred to as duty or obligation-based theory. The implication of this finding is that most of the journalists in southeast are of the view that balance and fairness should continue to be a guiding principle for journalistic practice.

III. Conclusion

In journalism practice, professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. Balance and fairness are imperative when reporting and many ethical consequences can arise from not being balance or fair. There is no gain stressing that for professional journalism to thrive, the precepts of balance and fairness in news reportage should be the watchdog. Southeast journalists in Nigeria understand the basic idea of balance and fairness but do not apply it in their reporting duties, especially when covering political matters. Therefore, the study concludes that there should be need to reconsider or rethink the ethical precept of balance and fairness in journalistic reporting, since most journalists do not stick to it when reporting.

IV. Recommendations

1. Given that the extent to which the respondents understand journalistic ethics of balance and fairness in news reportage is high, the study recommends continues orientation and reorientation of those who are new to the profession on the tenets of ethics of professional journalism.
2. Having found out that the extent to which Southeast journalists apply balance and fairness in their news reportis low, the study recommends that the precept should be reconceived to better accommodate the current trend.
3. Considering that balance and fairness should continue to be an ethical precept in journalism practice in Southeast Nigeria, it is recommended that journalists should endeavours to observe and apply the code of professional journalistic ethics in the discharge of their professional duties for better journalism practice in Nigeria.

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Appendix I
Sample Size Determination

<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>S</i>
10	10	220	140	1200	291
15	14	230	144	1300	297
20	19	240	148	1400	302
25	24	250	152	1500	306
30	28	260	155	1600	310
35	32	270	159	1700	313
40	36	280	162	1800	317
45	40	290	165	1900	320
50	44	300	169	2000	322
55	48	320	175	2200	327
60	52	340	181	2400	331
65	56	360	186	2600	335
70	59	380	191	2800	338
75	63	400	196	3000	341
80	66	420	201	3500	346
85	70	440	205	4000	351
90	73	460	210	4500	354
95	76	480	214	5000	357
100	80	500	217	6000	361
110	86	550	226	7000	364
120	92	600	234	8000	367
130	97	650	242	9000	368
140	103	700	248	10000	370
150	108	750	254	15000	375
160	113	800	260	20000	377
170	118	850	265	30000	379
180	123	900	269	40000	380
190	127	950	274	50000	381
200	132	1000	278	75000	382
210	136	1100	285	100000	384

Note.—*N* is population size. *S* is sample size.

Source: Krejcie & Morgan, 1970