



JOURNALISTIC OPTIONS FOR RESPONDING TO ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE 2015 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN NIGERIA

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Key terms

- ▶ “Journalistic options”
- ▶ “Response to ethical issues”
- ▶ “2015 elections”

Our focus

- ▶ **What options are available to journalists in addressing ethical issues/challenges in the reporting of the 2015 elections?**
- ▶ **We will look at the 2015 elections, examine how the electoral process is being covered and discuss the options available to dealing with the ethical issues journalists face.**
- ▶ **In doing all of these, we will touch on the place of ethics in human conduct and professional service, and how to strengthen Journalism as a profession and occupation.**

“2015 Elections”: What elections are we holding?

- ▶ February 14: Central elections into Executive and Legislative Houses: The Presidential, Senatorial, House of Reps
- ▶ February 21: State elections into Executive and Legislative Houses: Governorship and State House of Assembly.

Significance of elections

- ▶ Elections: Important component of participatory governance. They afford the electorate the opportunity to pick their representatives into executive and legislative offices at regular intervals.
- ▶ The 2015 elections represent the fifth attempt since the Fourth Republic began in 1999 to elect the people's representatives into public office. That is, we had in 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011
- ▶ They represent the culmination of the electoral process for the people to freely elect their leaders based on the acceptance or rejection of the choices placed before the electorate.

Significance of elections contd...

- ▶ They serve as regular referendum on performance in public office where incumbents are either returned or voted out for new faces and fresh ideas.
- ▶ Elections emphasise the sanctity of the ballot box as the means of empowering elected officials to carry out their promises to the electorate.
- ▶ They are credible when they are free, fair and represent the true feelings of the electorate.

“2015 Elections”: What are the issues?

- ▶ Access to voting: the availability of Permanent Voting Cards
- ▶ Insecurity: Insurgency in the NE, &NW, Militancy in the SS, Kidnapping in the SE & SW, Communal clashes in the NC
- ▶ The economy: Unemployment, poor public electricity, high cost of business
- ▶ Corruption: Ostentatious display of wealth, Lack of will to prosecute public looting
- ▶ Ethnicity: It's the turn of our zone
- ▶ Religion: Muslim vs Christianity
- ▶ Education: Poor results from WASCE; what's the colour of your certificate?
- ▶ Performance/Record: Military ruler in democratic setting vs Squandered first term in office

“2015 Elections”: The principal players in this election are the:

- ▶ Electoral management body
- ▶ The political parties and candidates
- ▶ The government and its law enforcement agents
- ▶ The civil society organisations
- ▶ The electorate and
- ▶ The media

2015 Elections: Guidelines for coverage

- ▶ The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) released in December 2014 the Nigeria Media Code of Electoral Coverage, which had earlier been adopted on 31st October 2014 by various media interest groups, namely: Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN)
- ▶ Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ)
- ▶ Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE)
- ▶ Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON)
- ▶ Radio, Television, Theatre and Arts Workers Union of Nigeria (RATTAWU)
- ▶ Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ)
- ▶ Media Rights Agenda (MRA)
- ▶ International Press Centre (IPC)

“Journalistic options”: The underlying principles guiding the Code for electoral coverage

- ▶ In envisaging different roles for the stakeholders, it has as its underlying principles:
- ▶ The promotion of the right of citizens to freely express themselves and have unfettered access to information on the electoral processes;
- ▶ The protection of the right of the media to freely access and truthfully disseminate information on the electoral processes;
- ▶ The promotion of the right of media access by parties, candidates and under-represented groups; and
- ▶ The promotion of democratic norms and values.

“Journalistic options”: Some salient provisions

- ▶ Under Article 1.1. of the code dealing with Parties and Candidates, *the Responsibility of Media Organisations* was couched in 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 to read:
 - ▶ A broadcast medium shall ensure equitable allocation of time at specific but similar periods for all parties contesting elections to state their programmes;
- ▶ A media organisation shall regularly apply the principle of equity in the coverage and reportage of campaigns and other activities of parties and candidates contesting elections

“Journalistic options”: Some salient provisions contd...

- ▶ Under 3.5.2, which deals with political advertising,
- ▶ “A media organisation shall not publish or air political adverts, advertorials and sponsored political news that seek to create hatred or incite violence”.

“Journalistic options”: Some salient provisions contd...

- ▶ Under 4. 3, which deals with Hate Speech, “A media organisation shall reject any material intended for publication or airing by parties, candidates and other interests that contains hateful or inciting words and messages”;
- ▶ And 4.4 “A media organisation shall refrain from publishing or airing abusive editorial comments or opinions that denigrate individuals or groups on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender or belief”;

“Journalistic options”: Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists:

- ▶ We must remember that the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage is an elaboration on the NPO code of ethics for Nigerian journalists, which was adopted in Ilorin on 20th March 1998. That code has 15 parts, ranging from such concerns as Accuracy to Fairness, Editorial Independence, Decency, Discrimination, Privacy etc.

“Journalistic options”: Significance of the two codes

- ▶ Public Trust: We expect a fair and professional deal from the media--Public
- ▶ Media Credibility: The public can act on what the media presents as it has been professionally processed-Media
- ▶ Responsibility: Four levels of responsibility: The personal, professional, organisational (Conscience, nurtured by truth-Guardian; Truth in defence of freedom-Nation; Towards a better life for the people-Vanguard)and constitutional (Sections 22 and 39)
- ▶ Essence is to have the media act fairly, sensibly, responsibly, ETHICALLY

Significance of the two codes contd...

- ▶ Central to the two documents is the need to earn the public trust without which journalism has no meaning to society.
- ▶ The pursuit of truth through honest, fair, factual and balanced account of significant happenings in society is at the heart of the watchdog and gate keeping functions of the media. When that trust in the content of what the media serves the public is missing, journalism becomes at best fiction writing, and at worst, a danger to the society it purports to serve.
- ▶ So codes are useful, regulatory guides to shape professional conduct.

Significance of the two codes contd...

- ▶ They distinguish the profession of journalism from a free for all trade without standards. They recognise the power of the media for good or ill to shape society and seek to reassure the public that media responsibility is something taken seriously, not only as a constitutional duty, but indeed a personal, professional and organisational responsibility.



“Journalistic options”: The challenges in redressing ethical infractions in the media

- ▶ There are two existing platforms to deal with ethical misconduct:
- ▶ Nigerian Press Council- a statutory agency whose legitimacy is a matter of litigation
- ▶ Independent Ombudsman-a self regulatory mechanism of the NPAN, which is supported by the NGE and NUJ
- ▶ Under both platforms, **emphasis is on moral suasion.**

challenges in redressing ethical infractions in the media contd...

- ▶ Normally, a member of the public is expected to take up issues with affected media houses directly and seek correction. Can then petition mediatory organ with particulars of the complaint and the relief sought. The pronouncement of the mediator is then carried out. It could be a retraction of the offending report and/or an apology. It could be a public rebuke of the medium. That report is expected to be displayed in a conspicuous corner of the publication
- ▶ Unfortunately these two bodies have serious challenges. The legal impediment to the NPC has paralysed its envisaged mediatory role. The Ombudsman machinery is yet to demonstrate its appeal to the public as its impact is only felt on the remote corner of a handful of newspapers.
- ▶ Even when the NPC was performing its mediatory role and ruled against media houses, the way and manner the decisions were published did not reassure the public the media really want its errors exposed! Today, those two options are severely limited. We will come back to that later.

“Response to Ethical Issues”: How has the media been covering the build up to the elections?

- ▶ Generally, the media have kept surveillance on the process, reporting the activities of the parties and their candidates: the conventions, the campaign rallies and their mammoth crowds—rented or staged, the intrigues and horse trading, the fundraising ceremonies and their mind boggling donations, the promises of all goodies under the rainbow.
- ▶ There has been more parroting of claims than any rigorous analysis of the promises, no winnowing of the genuine from the fanciful, the salacious from the substantial.

Response to ethical issues....Media coverage

- ▶ Focus of coverage is on staged events by political parties; limited focus on independently sourced reports.
- ▶ There has been discernible partisanship in the packaging of news that it is easier to see newspapers published in Nigeria than any truly Nigerian newspaper.
- ▶ It's been a harvest of advertisements. Some of the ads have been brilliant, humorous and arresting; some hateful, divisive and sectional.

“Response to Ethical issues”: A case of poor partisan news packaging

- ▶ On news broadcast, the content and packaging of the NTA Network news broadcast of January 28, provides an interesting study. It followed this pattern:
- ▶ First 10 minutes: President Goodluck Jonathan’s campaign in Port Harcourt and Akure
- ▶ Followed by two minutes of Major General Muhammadu Buhari’s campaign in Taraba State.
- ▶ Then, another two minutes on a suit filed against Buhari’s candidature, and then another minute of Mr. Femi Fani Kayode’s denunciation of Buhari’s candidature. We must remember Mr. Fani Kayode is director of the President’s media campaign.

“Response to Ethical issues”: A case of poor partisan news packaging contd.

- - ▶ Then the Director General of the National Orientation Agency is shown visiting the musician, Charlie Boy.
 - ▶ After some advert insertions, 90 percent sponsored by the PDP, the viewer is treated to another 5 minutes of the President’s meeting with some traditional rulers in Rivers State.

“Response to Ethical issues”: A case of poor partisan news packaging contd.

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- ▶ There was no equitable principle at play in the time allotted or the positioning and slant of the political reports. For a public medium, making use of public airwaves, it was a gross violation of the principle of balance in news treatment. Even some supporters of the PDP would have been embarrassed with such imbalance.
- ▶ In many state-government owned media stations, the pattern is significantly the same. The use of private newspapers sympathetic to some political causes/parties is only a shade better.

“Response to Ethical issues”: The Buhari Certificate issue

- ▶ Poor state of reporting in Nigerian journalism
- ▶ The media more interested in claims and counterclaims, instead of providing guidance, showing light.
- ▶ Premium Times showed enterprise by contacting Cambridge and Government College, Katsina?

“Response to Ethical issues”: The Fayose Death-wish Advert

- ▶ Two papers, The Punch and Daily Sun published front page advert on the ill suitability of the APC Presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari.
- ▶ An infringement on the Nigeria Media Code on Election Coverage’s provisions on Hate speech
- ▶ Under 4. 3, which deals with Hate Speech, “A media organisation shall reject any material intended for publication or airing by parties, candidates and other interests that contains hateful or inciting words and messages”;

Fayose Death wish advert...

- ▶ And 4.4 “A media organisation shall refrain from publishing or airing abusive editorial comments or opinions that denigrate individuals or groups on account of disability, race, ethnicity, tribe, gender or belief”;
- ▶ Also infringes Article 6 of the NPO Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists on DISCRIMINATION, “A journalist should refrain from making pejorative reference to a person’s ethnic group, religion, sex, or to any physical or mental illness or handicap”.

Feedback to the editors of the Punch and Sun Not published

- ▶ **FAYOSE'S DISTASTEFUL POLITICAL AD**

- ▶ “We have carefully studied the front page advert published in The Punch and Daily Sun of January 19 and we wish to state as follows: The ad panders to dangerous religious sentiments in its choice of quote from the book of Deuteronomy 30:19, which exhorts: “Therefore, choose life that both thee and thy seed may live”.
- ▶ It is sectional in its choice of the photographs of four past Nigerian Heads of Government, namely Murtala Mohammed, Sani Abacha, Musa Yar'Adua and Muhammadu Buhari, all Muslims from northern Nigeria, three of whom died while in office. The ad asks the voter to vote Goodluck Jonathan, not another northerner (Buhari) to avoid another one dying in office, suggesting that Buhari at 72 and being a northerner was destined to die in office. So that no one would be in doubt of its true intention, the ad says “Northern Presidency should wait till 2019”. It was signed by the Governor of Ekiti State, Ayo Fayose.

Feedback to the editors of the Punch and Sun Not published

- ▶ In blatantly playing the ethnic card and exploiting religion, the ad is divisive, tactless, tasteless, and insensitive. It purports that to be a northern Head of Government is to be a candidate for death. In attempting to play God about one's health or destiny, it is indecent.
- ▶ Lastly, it infringes Article 6 of the Code of Ethics of Nigerian Journalists, which says; "a journalist should refrain from making pejorative reference to a person's ethnic group, religion..." and section 3.5.2 of the Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage, which forbids publication of "political adverts that seek to create hatred". It should not have been accepted for publication" ---January 20, 2015.

Unpublished feedback...

- ▶ No mention on public criticism of the publications. Rather they reported that Fayose remained unrepentant. They sought to make it appear as a quarrel between Fayose and Buhari without accepting responsibility their publications provided the platform to publish hate.

So what other options can be employed to respond to ethical issues?

- ▶ So, we must mount pressure to ensure the regulatory platforms work. I had recommended in August 2010 (Media Review: 9) two options for the Press Council: Go on appeal against the decision of the lower court and be guided by its outcome or seek an amendment to the objectionable areas identified by the High Court judge. The Council chose to go on appeal. Almost five years after, the matter is yet to be resolved. Even if the NPC manages to perform mediatory role will its pronouncements be given the deserved attention? Remember, we had said earlier: “Even the NPC was performing its mediatory role and ruled against media houses, the way and manner the decisions were published did not reassure the public the media really want its errors exposed”.

So what other options can be employed to respond to ethical issues?

Contd...

- ▶ The point needs stressing that it is in the enlightened self interest of the media to get its house in order by strengthening individual internal ombudsman regulatory mechanism to be more sensitive to public concern and sharpen their definition of news.

Options for responding to ethical issues

- ▶ The media must operate from a position of strength, anchored on knowledge. The main issue is reporting that underscores the people's right to know and does so in a fair and responsible manner.
- ▶ Vital need to familiarise themselves with the rudiments of ethical reporting: factuality, fairness, depth of research and investigation, contextual analysis, sensitivity to what will deepen public understanding, emphasise issues in the public interest over those of public interest, accept mistakes and correct them promptly, provide adequate access to parties involved

So what other options can be employed to respond to ethical issues?

- ▶ In this regard, we want to recommend adopting the **5-way Test of Balanced and Ethical Reporting**
- ▶ Is it a factual account?
- ▶ Does it deepen the electoral process in the public interest?
- ▶ Is it fair to all sides/parties to the issues?
- ▶ Is the language of presentation designed to build or pull down, conflict-sensitive or reckless?
- ▶ Does it tower above any pecuniary or vested interest?

Conclusion. ..

- ▶ The NPAN must also get its umbrella body to work. Six years is enough time to feel its impact otherwise outsiders who feel the media prefers licence to liberty may be tempted to sharpen the teeth of a regulatory body. The Independent Ombudsman mechanism must be funded to be truly independent and functional.

Conclusion....

- ▶ Operating under the premise that “the media as guardians of public conscience and morality need a special and regular and special attention so that the public trust reposed in them is not betrayed”, we have tried over the years to use the instrumentality of a professional watchdog to call attention to ethical infractions. As a developmental project, the returns make it difficult to sustain. We welcome partners in collaborative ventures to strengthen the ability to continue to do this.
- ▶ Indeed the Association for Communication Scholars and Professionals in Nigeria can put in place its own mechanism as a needed public service

Conclusion

- ▶ We say the Nigerian media have grappled with the challenges of reporting the 2015 elections. They have done well in general terms reporting the utterances and activities of politicians, the political parties and other principal stakeholders. They haven't done enough independent reporting or analysis to justify public confidence in their editorial prowess as independent analysts of the political process. It is desirable for the media not to take public patronage for granted but continue to explore means of strengthening that bond in their own enlightened interest.

Conclusion

- ▶ It is our view that Ethical reporting is a journalistic requirement that is at the heart of the watchdog and gate keeping functions of the media. Without it journalism is no more than a free for all; a grave danger to society. Lovers of the media with legitimate interest in seeing the media develop as a strong, free and responsible pillar of democracy should continue to work towards that objective

Conclusion...

- ▶ We restate, in the words of Media Review: “The media as guardians of public conscience and morality need a special and regular and special attention so that the public trust reposed in them is not betrayed”.
- ▶ Thank you for your attention.