

## **A Review of the Extent to Which Ethical Principles Are Considered In The Process Of Production of Newspapers by Print Media Houses in Kenya**

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**Abstract:** *The general objective of the study was to find out factors underlying ethical considerations in the production of information and how the print mass media publish the information. This paper examines the extent to which ethical principles are considered in the process of productions of newspapers by Kenyan media houses. The study was guided by Roxborough's Principle of Ethics theory of 1979, which holds that communication should always be guided by ethical principles which he points out as the principle of social responsibility. Descriptive cross-sectional research design was used. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the target population who are the staff of one media houses. Systematic random sampling was then used to choose respondents from five departments whereby a sample size of 160 respondents were selected. Data was collected by the use of questionnaires where drop and pick method was used. The primary data collected was analyzed with the help of SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences) Program. The data collected was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The study established that editors focus on ethical issues such as unnamed sources; confidentiality; misrepresentation; obscenity, taste and tone in reporting; paying for news articles; plagiarism; discrimination; covering ethnic, religious and sectarian conflict; recording interviews and telephone conversations; privacy; intrusion into grief and shock; sex discrimination; financial journalism, protection of children; victims of sexual crimes; use of pictures and names; innocent relatives and friends; acts of violence; editor's responsibility, and advertisements. It was recommended that both the media houses and the public in Kenya should be sensitized on the complexities surrounding the concept of ethics in journalism.*

**Keywords:** *Ethical Principles, Newspaper Production, Print Media, Kenya*

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### **I. Introduction**

The free spread of information is an essential condition for human progress in any society. The role of the news media in disseminating information in the form of news is considered so important that a free media industry is taken to be an essential attribute of every civilized democratic society. However, information is useful only if it is accurate and objective. Arrangements must therefore be made by media houses to protect the public interest in accuracy and objectivity of news. This usually involves formal legal regulation imposed on the news media by the state and internal ethical observances stimulated from within the media industry with or without the sanction of the law. Just as excessive and oppressive legal controls can harm responsible journalism, so can lack of proper ethical observance (Owiro, 1992, p. 68).

Using the mass media can be counterproductive if the channels used are not audience-appropriate, or if the message being delivered is too emotional, fear arousing/traumatizing, or controversial. Undesirable side effects usually can be avoided through proper formative research, knowledge of the audience, experience in linking media channels to audiences, and message testing. This paper conceives mass media ethics as regarding all those moral values and professional codes of ethics that need to be considered in the process of collecting, producing and reporting information to the public by the media. The content of the information in the newspaper and the potential effect of the information on the society are important issues of concern to the author in understanding how mass media conflicts with the society in Kenya.

### **II. Professionalism and Codes of Ethics**

The freedom of expression, which media operators everywhere long for and defend, should necessarily bring with it a sense of responsibility. Being free to do research and report means that journalists are also answerable for their reporting, because as they are professionals in their work. If journalists are answerable for their reporting, there needs to be some sort of reference point against which they can judge the goodness or badness of their professional activity. It is thus necessary to examine the codes of ethics and self-regulating mechanisms for media workers.

In actual fact, around the world there is a growing tendency among journalists to combine professional skills and techniques with high standards of ethical behaviour in their work. A research on internet for material on ethics and journalism produced around 759,000 results which include reference to Codes of Ethics for Journalists, initiatives such as the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, among many others (Wikipedia, 2006). The following themes are considered to be common to most codes of journalistic standards and ethics:

### **III. Objectivity**

There ought to be unequivocal separation between news and opinion. Are the in-house editorials and opinion pieces clearly separated from news pieces? Is there a distinction between our news reporters and opinion staff? The Code of Ethics of the Kenyan Union of Journalists states that “Journalists shall distinguish clearly in their reports between comments, conjecture and fact. They shall write in such a manner that the reader is able to distinguish among comment, conjecture and fact” (<http://www.ijnet.org/director>).

A reporter must avoid conflicts of interest, incentives to report a story with a given slant. This includes not taking bribes and not reporting on stories that affect the reporter’s personal, economic or political interests. The codes of Ethics of the Kenyan Union of Journalists (KUJ) and of the Media industry Steering Committee both make reference of these issues. The KUJ code states that:

Journalists and their employers shall conduct themselves in a manner that protects them from real or apparent conflicts of interest. Secondly, such conflicts of interest may arise through accepting gifts, bribes, favours, free travel, special treatment or any other form of inducement or privilege (Wikipedia, 2006).

#### **Sources**

Journalists should avoid using anonymous sources when possible:

Unnamed sources should not be used unless the pursuit of the truth will best be served by not naming the source who must be known by the editor and reporter. When material is used in a report from sources who must be known by the editor and reporter. When material is used in a report from sources other than the reporter’s, these sources should be indicated in the story (<http://www.ijnet.org/director>).

The attribution of statements made by individuals or other news media should be accurate. Pictures, sounds, and quotations must not be presented in a misleading context (or lack thereof). Simulations, re-enactments, alterations, and artistic imaginings must be clearly labelled in such, if not avoided entirely. In particular, plagiarism is strongly stigmatized as shown below:

Using someone else’s work without attributions – whether deliberately or thoughtlessly – is a serious ethical breach. However, borrowing ideas from elsewhere is considered fair journalistic practice.

Words directly quoted from sources other than the writer’s own reporting should be attributed. In general, when work is used as the source for stylistic inspiration the final result must be clearly different from the original work of the reporter (<http://www.ijnet.org/director>).

#### **Accuracy and Standards for Factual Reporting**

Reporters are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted to story preparation and the space available. Practical suggestions to ensure such accuracy include the following: the effort to seek reliable sources; events with a single eyewitness may be reported as fact; controversial facts are reported with attribution; independent act checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable.

#### **Slander and Libel Considerations**

Reporting the truth is never considered libel, but this means that accuracy and attribution are very important so what is reported really is the truth. Private persons have privacy rights that must be balanced against the public interest in reporting information about them. Intrusion and enquiries into an individual’s private life without the person’s consent is prohibited unless overriding public interest exists. Matters concerning a person’s home, family, religion, ethnicity, race, clan, sexuality, political affiliation, personal life and private affairs are covered by the concept of privacy, except where this impinges upon the public interest (<http://www.ijnet.org/director>).

#### **Harm Limitation Principle**

During the normal course of an assignment, a reporter might go about gathering facts and details about gathering facts and details, conducting interviews, doing research, background checks, taking photos, videotaping, recording sound. Should he or she report everything learned? If so, how should this be done? The principle of limitation of harm means that some weight needs to be given to the negative consequences of full disclosure, creating a practical and ethical dilemma. Both the Media Industry Steering Committee Code of Ethics and that of the Kenyan Union of Journalists list a number of situations in which it may be necessary to

limit the information provided: protection of children; victims of sex crimes; innocent relatives; acts of violence; intrusion into tragedy and grief.

Regarding possible obscenity and the need for taste and tone in reporting, the Media Industry Steering Committee indicates that:

In general, the media, the media should avoid publishing obscene, vulgar, or offensive material unless such material contains a news value which is necessary in the public interest. In the same vein, publication of photographs showing mutilated bodies, bloody incidents, and abhorrent scenes should be avoided unless the publication of such photographs will serve the public interest. Television stations must exercise great care and responsibility when presenting programs where children are likely to be part of the audience (<http://www.ijnet.org/director>).

#### **IV. The Principle Of Ethics Theory**

This study was based on Roxborough's (1979) Principles of Ethics Theory. The theory is founded on the premise that communication should always be guided by ethical principles taking into account the morality of interaction. Roxborough (ibid.) points out the three basic principles of ethics as follows:

##### **The Principle of Truthfulness**

This principle states that on both individual and social levels, truth and freedom are inseparable; without truth as the basic – the starting point and criterion of discernment, judgement, choice and action, there can be no authentic exercise of freedom. This principle is based on the assumption that some of the social communication is deliberately untrue. It is not that the actors say what is overtly false, but it can also distort the truth by implying things that are not so or withholding relevant facts. This principle implies that proper exercise of the right to information demands that the content of what communicated be true and within the limits set by justice. Thus, there should be no harm caused by such communication.

With reference to the study, it is therefore, a fundamental principle that mass media channels should not deliberately seek to deceive or distort reality, by what they say, imply, or fail to say. Hence, the print media becomes an instrument that is beneficial if well used, just in the same way it would impact negatively on individuals and society if false information is given.

##### **The Principle of Dignity of the Human Person**

The principle states that it is an "imperative requirement" that mass communication "respect the human person, his rights and freedom to make a responsible choice. Therefore, any advert that influences one's capacity to act otherwise is a compromise and infringes on these basic rights." Roxborough (1979) says that this is manifest in mass media information that violates the dignity of the human person harmful to individuals and society alike. Communication that meets this standard is, among other things, true expression of solidarity. Indeed, the two things – communication and solidarity – are inseparable, because solidarity is a consequence of genuine and right communication and the free circulation of ideas that enhance knowledge and respect for others. This implies that when people fail to practise a rigorous respect for the moral, cultural and spiritual requirements, based on the dignity of the person and on the proper identity of each community, beginning with the family and religious societies, then even material abundance and the conveniences that technology makes available will prove unsatisfying and in the end contemptible.

In regard to the study, this principle emphasizes the study problem by alluding to the fact that currently, the media industry in Kenya is in conflict with sections of the society because it has failed to meet the standards expected of it.

#### **V. Statement Of The Problem**

The media, both print and electronic, can play an important role in defusing tension, reducing and containing conflicts in the country. It can do so by being deeply aware of the fragility of a country's social fabric, of the efforts being expended at unifying a country's polarized and ethnicized politics and more importantly by objectively reporting conflict incidences and other news as they unfold. However, recent reports appearing in cross sections of mainstream print media in Kenya have cast a pale shadow on the role, neutrality and objectivity of media in reporting on conflicts and other news in the country.

Despite the recent production of the Code of Conduct for Journalists and the Mass Media, published in April 2001, under the auspices of the Media Industry Steering Committee (MISC), media have found themselves in incidences of conflict with sections of the society (Mutere, 2006, p. 2). Most of these conflicts seem to resolve around ethical issues. In Kenya, for instance, evidence (Mutere, 2006) suggest that with freedom in mass media industry, the biggest problems are of ethics and professionalism. Indeed, freedom without responsibility constitutes the biggest threat to journalism in Kenya (Mutere, 2006, p. 4). In 1999, Tony

Gacoka was imprisoned without due process (Daily Nation, 1999, August 21), but was freed soon afterwards; in July 2001 Asena Muyoma and David Matende, publisher and editor of the Weekly Citizen, were jailed and charged with publishing unverified and alarmist information. They had reported on the political troubles of a police commissioner and an assistant minister (Daily Nation, 1999, August 21).

Kenyan newspapers play a very crucial role in delivering important information and news to the public in Kenya. However, if newspaper writers and news reporters (journalists) do not uphold the professional ethics, by altering the information to suit certain circumstances, conflict of interest between the public and print media may arise. From a theoretical perspective, studies (Mutere, 2006; Macquail, 2001) on ethics in mass media broadcast have focused on the evidence of irresponsible acts by the journalists and media houses, pointing out the ethical inadequacies. However, little is provided on the print media conflict and the public thus, paving way for this study to provide an insight on conflict of interest between newspaper writers and the public.

## **VI. Materials And Methods**

A descriptive cross sectional design was used to establish the conflict of interest between the newspaper writers and the public. This allowed for analysis of all relevant variables at the same time. The main research design adopted in this case was survey. This is because the study sought to solicit opinion from one media group on areas of conflict of interest between the newspaper writers and the public. The target population of the study comprised all the staff working at one media group in Nairobi. Nairobi was picked since it is the headquarters of the organization and nothing has been documented on the conflict of interest between the newspaper writers and the public. This mainly comprised staff working in five different departments. The departments were: Sales and Marketing, Administration, Production, Editorial and Correspondent.

The main sampling technique that was first adopted is purposive sampling. The study only had interest in one media group in Nairobi. Thus, the study picked 160 of one media group staff. The sample size for one media group was picked proportionate. The staff was classified based on departments. The author then used systematic random samplings in each department the staffs were found. In each department, the author picked a sample after every 3<sup>rd</sup> element until the population of sample in each category of classification was exhausted. A list of all the staff in the above-mentioned departments was requested from the administration department. The assumption in using the list provided by administration department is that they had an up to date list of all their staff.

A questionnaire was used as the main research tool for the study. The questionnaire was chosen as it provides a more comprehensive view than any other research tool. All the staff members chosen as part of the sample were asked the same questions in the same order. The questionnaire contained both open and closed questions. It was standardized and completely predetermined. Drop and pick method was adopted. The questionnaire was distributed to 160 staff members identified in the study. The research was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Once the data had been collected, it was examined for completeness, consistency and reliability. Descriptive statistics technique was used to analyze the quantitative data and these included frequencies, means, graphical presentations such as pie charts and bar graphs. The use of Microsoft Excel and the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) program was used in analyzing the data.

## **VII. Results And Discussion**

### **Ethical Factors Considered in Determining the Information Presented in Print Media**

The study sought to establish the extent to which ethical principles are considered in the process of production of newspaper by one media house. In order to find out the difference between the existence of the codes of ethics and the actual use of such codes of ethics, the respondents were asked to rate the statement “the content of any information in print media must go through editorial department for ethical and quality consideration.” From their responses, the findings were as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Ethical and Quality Consideration by Editorial Department**

| <b>Rating</b>  | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
| Agree          | 60               | 37.5           |
| Strongly agree | 100              | 62.5           |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>160</b>       | <b>100</b>     |

Source: Survey Data, 2009

The analysis in Table 1 shows that all the respondents agreed with the statement that the content of any information in print media must go through editorial department for ethical, but are also utilized through the editorial department at the media house. The editors do grammatical, content and language corrections on the work by proof-reading it. The editors on their part have to understand the possible legal implications of any piece of work being prepared for publication. The editor also questions the journalists for their sources of their

information not necessarily to be told about their names, but to find out if the journalists are writing from facts, making an analysis; and/or giving personal views in the story.

In an interview, two of the editors shared on the several tasks they do in the course of their duty. They said that any editor who decides to open his/her columns on a controversial subject is not obliged to publish all the letters received in regard to that subject. He/she may select and publish only some of them either in their entirety or the gist thereof. However, in exercising this right, he/she should make an honest attempt to ensure that what is published is not lop-sided but presents a fair balance between the pros and cons to end debate in the event of a rejoinder being sent by two or more parties on a controversial subject.

The other focus by editors is on: unnamed sources; confidentiality; misrepresentation; obscenity, taste and tone in reporting; paying for news articles; plagiarism; discrimination; covering ethnic, religious and sectarian conflict; recording interviews and telephone conversations; privacy; intrusion into grief and shock; sex discrimination; financial journalism, protection of children; victims of sexual crimes; use of pictures and names; innocent relatives and friends; acts of violence; editor's responsibility, and advertisements. All these issues involve ethics.

The question that one may ask is on whether or not the ethical considerations have been met; it means that there will be no more conflicts or raised eye-brows on such information by the public. In this regard, respondents were asked to rate the statement "if ethical issues are well addressed, media houses would avoid conflicts were section(s) of the society." The following table shows the findings that were obtained.

**Table 2: Whether Ethical Considerations are a Solution to Conflicts**

| Rating            | Frequency  | Percent    |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Strongly disagree | 43         | 26.9       |
| Disagree          | 71         | 44.4       |
| Undecided         | 8          | 5          |
| Agree             | 54         | 17.5       |
| Strongly agree    | 40         | 6.3        |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>160</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: Survey Data, 2009

An analysis in Table 2 indicates that majority (71%) of the respondents did not support the statement that if ethical issues are well addressed media houses would avoid conflicts with section(s) of the society. This means that ethical issues are just one of the causes of conflict between mass media and the society. However, it also implies that the word ethics is relative. That despite having passed the professional code of ethics, some of the content in the print media may still be criticized as being unethical, and that is why the other half of the respondents did not support the statement. The author, based on these findings, came to a conclusion that it is the readers' definition of ethics that brings out the difference and thus, conflict of interests between them and the media channels. This was because coupled with findings it is evident that one may quickly blame the readers' ethics rather than the professional ethics for the conflicts.

Another factor that may determine the actual ethical consideration is the condition at the work place. Some media companies may, for instance, have either pro-government or anti-government policies in their operations. Consequently, this would determine how they report on it and the percentage of time given to government-oriented events. This will happen to religion, legal and any other issue that the policies may choose to incline to. Accordingly, respondents were asked to rate the statement "although works according to the interests of the company he/she is working for in journalism, he/she has the personal conviction to censor what he/she is reporting on to the public." Various responses were given as summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: The Company's Interest Verses the Journalist's Conviction in Reporting**

| Rating            | Frequency  | Percent    |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Strongly disagree | 27         | 16.9       |
| Disagree          | 21         | 13.1       |
| Undecided         | 32         | 20         |
| Agree             | 44         | 27.5       |
| Strongly agree    | 36         | 22.5       |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>160</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: Survey Data, 2009

An analysis of Table 3 shows that majority (50%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that although they work according to the interests of the company their working for in journalism, he/she has the personal conviction to censor what he/she is reporting on to the public. Thus means that despite the structures at the company, personal conviction of the journalist plays an important role in censoring what they report on. However, 30% of the respondents said that the company's policies. This means that journalists lose some of their autonomy to the company when it comes to reporting on controversial issues.

### **VIII. Conclusion And Recommendations**

In a nutshell, the study found that the main ethical considerations are at the level of editorial policy of the media house. However, the company's policy guidelines in regard to reporting of contentious issues in the society was also mentioned by the respondents as a factor that is considered a part of the work ethics at the company, in determining the information presented in print media. Based on the study findings, it was concluded that the information content in print media goes through ethical considerations process. It is thus recommended that there is need for media companies to improve on their payment scheme. This will go a long way in motivating their staff and also enhancing quality in services provision.

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