

Truth and Objectivity in the Ethics of Journalism: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Truth and objectivity are fundamental principles of the ethics of journalism. The quality of good journalism in any society, among others, is measured by these two indispensable principles. Because of their importance to the profession, this paper interrogates these concepts in the light of their practicability. Can truth and objectivity be achieved in the field of journalism in view of our various conceptions of truth? How can we deal with the problem of concealment of truth and misleading reports in journalism? Are journalists morally bound to tell the whole truth to the public always? These are the key questions this paper seeks to address. It explores the various notions of truth, namely: the correspondence theory, the coherent theory and the pragmatic theory. The question of objectivity in the presentation of information to the public was equally addressed. Can objectivity be ever achieved in journalism? What are the prospects and problems of journalistic objectivism? The paper adopts the method of critical and textual analysis. In all, the paper concludes that truth and objectivity can be achieved in journalism if practitioners are well tutored in professional ethics with a consciousness of its concrete internalization and actual practicalization.

Keywords: Truth; Objectivity; Ethics; Journalism; Professionalism

INTRODUCTION

Ethics has sometimes been defined as the “art” of conduct just as logic has been called the ‘art’ of thinking. Ethics does not teach the doing of good, but the knowledge of the nature and condition of goodness. This knowledge may be applied to practice but it does not necessarily imply the condition of will required for good conduct. Ethics has, however, to do not with actual conduct, but with right or good conduct and accordingly with any ideal from which rules may be laid down for actual conduct. By this function, ethics may be called a normative science. This is

because it has to do with the facts of conduct as displayed in individual experience and the social order and development and thus deals with a more or less well-defined group of phenomena. The term ethics does not refer merely to conduct, but also to a community or agreement amongst a larger or smaller group of men in approaching and appropriating or disapproving certain modes of life and ideas of character. It is concerned with actions that can be right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable approved or disapproved, worthy or unworthy. Ethics encompasses one's responsibility, duty, or obligation for his behaviour. It has been defined as a theory of morality which deals with principles of good conduct. Put succinctly, ethics deals with judgment as to the rightness or wrongness, desirability of undesirability of our actions (Ezedike, 2019:6)

Ethics can also be defined as the study of the supreme good. It is an attempt to discover those rules which should be followed because they are good in themselves. This implies that ethics is evaluative and prescriptive in function. It prescribes whether an action is right or wrong, whether a certain behavior is justifiable or not. It evaluates those principles and rules that should be regarded as norms because of their intrinsic or inherent value.

Every profession has a code of conduct that regulates the activities of those who engage in it. The moral code prescribing dos and donots in a given work area is generally known as *professional ethics*. This is why we have medical ethics, business ethics, accounting ethics, press ethics and so on. Professional ethics deals with the acceptable code of conduct in a workplace, business or particular profession. It can also be called work ethics or vocational ethics. It has to do with certain moral codes or codes of ethics that regulate the activities of people in a particular profession.

Professional ethics is very important because it regulates the professional lives of individuals in the workplace and ensures certain basic standards are maintained for the good of all. It includes physician-patient relationship, truth-telling, moral responsibility, and the issue of informed consent in medical practice. In some other professions, issues of plagiarism, teacher-student relationship, dress code, integrity, fairness, truth and objectivity are very prominent. However, the problem here is that some of these issues are contentious. There is the question of who sets the standards and with what criteria, moral principles or theories? Are they absolute or circumstantial? Can such principles be universalized or are they relative and contextualized? These are the problems this paper seeks to address.

One of the main objectives of this study is to address some contradictions created by the concept of objectivity, which is presented as a guiding paradigm within the framework of journalism and is an extremely important phenomenon in terms of ethical journalism. In this context, it is extremely important to look at the concept of objectivity within the scope of journalism practice. Generally, among the criticisms brought to objectivity; there are market integration, mandatory relations with bureaucracy, codes that reduce subjectivity, questioning and ownership structure. All this poses an obstacle to objectivity in journalistic practice and makes impartiality impossible.

According to relativists who expressed the view that "objectivity is a myth" in journalism. Because journalists think and act with the values of the society they live in. Underlining that journalism cannot be independent of social facts, the relativists state that the journalist will be affected by the social institutions and factors (eg education, religion, language, gender, etc.). Journalists and editors are conditioned by many social factors (eg gender, conditions, and education). This conditioning doubles with the need to be attentive in the process of selecting stories and handling details. This social anxiety makes it impossible for journalists and editors to be objective (Ryan, 2001: 4). As a result, objectivity is constantly affected and damaged by the journalist's personal and social values. It seems quite difficult for the journalist to exhibit a journalistic approach far from these factors.

We shall briefly explore different theories of ethics in order to excavate their implications for truth and objective journalism.

The Consequentialist-Utilitarian Tradition

Consequentialism see the ultimate criterion of morality in some consequences that result from acts. Essentially, consequentialist ethics hold that an action is right if it produces the best outcome or best overall results. There are different versions of consequentialism (it is not a single theory but, rather, a family of theories united by their agreement that results or consequences are the criteria for determining the morality of actions). In this paper, we shall focus on the dominant version of teleological ethics (consequentialism) namely; utilitarianism. Utilitarianism as a theory of ethics has two basic futures namely: the consequentialist principle (or its teleological aspect) and the utility principle (or its hedonic aspect). The consequentialist principle holds that the rightness or wrongness of an act is basically determined by the goodness or badness of its outcome or end result. In other words, the end justifies the means. On the other hand, the utility principle holds that the only thing that is good in itself must produce some kind of pleasurable state, happiness, or quantifiable welfare (Pojman, 1999:104-156). The utilitarian is concerned with the greatest happiness, pleasure, welfare or benefit of the greatest number of people. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are considered the foremost proponents of utilitarianism.

Should a journalist toe the line of utilitarianism in doing his job? In other words, should he/she consider the greatest happiness of the greatest number as his/her guiding ethical principle in the profession? If the answer is in the affirmative what happens to the minorities whose voices may not be heard? What becomes of the views or opinions of the minorities which might be intentionally suppressed in order to promote the happiness, pleasure or welfare of the greatest number? Here lies the dangers of the utilitarianism as a working theory for the journalist.

The Deontological Tradition

Deontology, derived from the Greek *deon* (duty), is an ethical system which holds that the rightness of an act (and our duty to perform it) is either not entirely determined by the intrinsic value of its consequences or is not at all determined by such value. The basic principle of deontological ethics is that right (what we ought to do) is not basically or entirely dependent on the result or outcome or consequences of our action(s). This makes deontological ethics a direct contrast to the basic principle of teleological ethics which judges the rightness or wrongness of an act or rule solely on the intrinsic value of its consequences. The emphasis here is on duty for its own sake and not on the outcome of our actions. Duty is intrinsically good and must be performed with goodwill, according to Kant. The will, which Kant described as constituting what is called character, needs to be good for a right conduct to ensue. Kant also insisted that in order to determine whether an act is good or bad, right or wrong, that we should examine such in the light of its conformity with a valid moral rule. Thus, a good action is not good because it produces good result, but rather because such action conforms to the moral law.

A moral action must be “categorical imperative”, that which upholds human dignity and is capable of universalizability.

In view of the foregoing, what are the implications of Kant’s Deontology for journalism? It implies objectivity and commitment to duty with the limits of practical reason. The problem here is that blind, rigid and dispassionate commitment to duty without minding its consequences, at times, may bring about some unpalatable results or ends for both the journalist and society.

The Virtue Ethics Tradition

Despite their apparent differences, utilitarianism and Deontology both seek to address the question of, what actions are right? Virtue ethics asks instead, what kind of person should we be? Moral character rather than right action is fundamental in this ethical tradition, which was articulated by the ancient Greek philosophers, and received its fullest expression by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. The role of ethics according to Aristotle is to enable us to lead “the good life”. The good life in Aristotle’s context is only possible for the virtuous persons – that is, the persons who develop character traits that we call virtues. However, the concept of virtue has been given divergent interpretations over the ages, such that there is no general agreement among philosophers on what it means.

For Plato, virtue has to do with the ability of the rational part to exercise firm control over the spirited and appetitive parts; for Aristotle, it simply means the ability to strike a balance between deficiency and excess. Most medieval philosophers, represented by Augustine and Aquinas, saw virtue as conformity to God’s will and the demonstration of faith, hope, charity and prudence. Some philosopher consider truth and objectivity as good character traits that constitute virtue. Others include integrity, fairness and honesty as indispensable components of virtuousness. The implications of virtue ethics for the journalist is that truth must always be told without concealment. He/she must be fair, upright and honest in discharging his or her professional duties. This problem with this view is the persistent ‘air of indeterminacy’ and absence of guiding principle on how to attain these virtues.

The Concept of Truth

In the history of philosophy, truth has been given divergent conceptions and definitions, such that there is no solidarity of opinion on the issue. Hence, we can talk about truth in terms of correspondence, coherence or workability. There are also views that truth is relative to individuals, to societies and to conceptual schemes, respectively. The traditional theories of truth are worthy of brief discussion here. We begin with the correspondence theory of truth which holds that truth is simply the correspondence of judgment with a fact or the correspondence of a belief or proposition with a fact, a state of affairs or reality (Uduigwomen, 1996:140). In this regard, reality is what actually exists, while truth is our estimation of such reality. What we hold to be true must correspond with such a fact or reflect reality which we hold to exist. According to this theory, a judgment or proposition is true if there is a fact corresponding to it, and untrue if otherwise. This theory was chiefly advocated by Aristotle, Moore and Taski but was popularized by Bertrand Russell in his works. However, it has been criticized for its vagueness and incommensurability. The coherent theory of truth holds that a proposition is true if and only if it agrees or is logically consistent with other statements of theories of the system. This means that truth is determined by the internal consistency or logical coherence with other statements. Proponents of this view includes Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Bradley, Neurath and Hempel. The coherence theory of truth has been criticized on the grounds of the possibility of a statement being consistent or coherent with one system and inconsistent or incoherent with another. Another traditional theory of truth is the pragmatic theory of truth popularized by William James who claimed that the truth of an idea is determined by its usefulness and expediency. Although he did

admit that an idea may sometimes copy some aspects of reality, he did not believe that an idea must meet this criterion in order to be considered true. Indeed, like his fellow pragmatist Peirce and Dewey, James believed that both reality and our ideas are constantly changing; thus any correspondence between an idea and some aspects of reality could be only temporary and phenomenon. In all, the pragmatic theory of truth holds that truth is neither stagnant nor eternal but changes with time. (Hallman, 2003: 225). This position has been criticized for making fluid, subjective and relative to time. Lastly, the performative theory of truth, postulated by P.F. Strawson, holds that truth is a judgment about judgment. The term 'true' according to him, is a performative expression rather than a descriptive expression as we had traditionally assumed. His argument is basically hinged on linguistic analysis. However, Strawson failed to attempt a distinction between among performative expressions.

The Duty to Tell the Whole Truth

We are using the term 'truth' here in an eclectic sense to refer to what corresponds to a fact, what is coherent and verifiable by everyone, as a reliable information that reflects the actual state of affairs or reality. A journalist hired by a firm or government has a moral duty to tell the whole truth always. By signing a contract, he undertakes an obligation to do his/her utmost to discharge that responsibility. Acceptance to work for any organization does not relieve the journalist of his/her moral responsibility as a citizen or as a moral agent. A moral action is that which is intrinsically good and praiseworthy, while a moral duty can be defined as that within our power and for which we can be held responsible. (Lacey: 138). The moral obligation to tell the truth may not be tied to any legal stipulation. Persons who are concerned with doing what is right need not set limits of their conduct at the bounds of delineated by law, for the law does not always conform with standards of moral right. (Callahan, 1988:163). To be more specific, if the law permits a journalist to refrain from disclosing some information, it does not follow that he has a moral right to withhold such information from the public. If the law provides no sanctions against deceptive publications, an ethical journalist will nevertheless not engage in wilful deceptive publications against those who place their trust in him. Again, media houses have many ways of concealing truth from the public for some economic or political reasons – not by lying to them but simply by not telling them facts that are relevant to the dissecting of a story. There is also the problem of misleading statements or information that emanates from media houses. It may come in the form of pictures (photo-shopping), adverts, news items or reports that leaves the reader, hearer or viewer's mind with a false impression about reality.

In journalism, we were told that not all truths are publishable. A publishable truth must be "fit to print", it is argued. This means that such publication must be of public interest – any event, issue or development which, in judgment of the working press, deserves to be brought to the knowledge of public. Two, it must not undermine national security, and three, it must not offend good taste and public morality (Okoye, 2007:145). Viewed critically, these conditions are fraught with some fundamental problems. To divide truth into publishable and unpublishable truth is a parochial and minimalist approach. It does not conform to the spirit of philosophical inquiry which entail the search for and exposition of truth in its broadest sense. It is also quite subjective to leave the decision of what publishable or unpublishable truth in the hands of an individual. On the issue of undermining national security, many dictators, tyrants and totalitarians have muzzled the press under the guise of safeguarding national security, in order to keep the masses ignorant and forestall public or foreign reactions to bad leadership. While the protection of national security is of utmost importance through restrictions on what is dished out to the public, care must also be taken to ensure that truth is not suppressed alongside falsehood.

Who should be held responsible for the concealment of truth, misinformation, misleading publications and outright falsehood that emanates from the press? Some philosophers have argued that apportioning blame or praise in moral situations depends on circumstances in which the agent finds himself or herself. This has to do with freedom and responsibility, voluntary and involuntary actions. When an action is performed consciously, knowledgeably and voluntarily in the absence of impediments or coercion, one is said to have performed such an action freely. When a journalist is forced against his/her will, or compelled by his/her employers to write things that are untrue or pass a deceptive information to the public, it may be considered an involuntary action. Aristotle posited that “an action is non-voluntary when it is done under compulsion or in ignorance”. Under such circumstances, an agent is not morally responsible for his/her actions. However, if contrary is the case, such an agent is morally responsible for his/her actions provided there is freedom for alternative courses of action, knowledge and absence of coercion.

The Principle of Objectivity

Objectivity has to do with the state of being just, unbiased and uninfluenced by emotions or personal prejudices in judgment based on plain, observed facts. It is the opposite of subjectivity – that is, opinions that are formed based on personal feelings, biases and experiences, as opposed to general observation and reasoning. The journalist is expected to keep himself/herself out of the report by not injecting his/her emotions, personal opinions and biases into the news report (Okoye, 2007:152). Objectivity is object dependent rather than mind-dependent unlike subjectivity. It is the spirit of scientific inquiry. In the empirical sciences, the object of scientific inquiry is the “external objective reality” in contrast with subjective beliefs and values which are often subjects of controversy and debates.

The concept of objectivity that emerged as a result of the spread of the positivist perspective emerged as an experimental method within the positivist theory, and this was defined by Auguste Comte as a scientific theory (Wien, 2005: 4). Classical epistemology or positivism stated that it is possible to reach an objective, impartial or neutral knowledge of nature or society (Berning, 2011: 192). By rationalizing social life, modernism paved the way for the objectivity that emerged in the scientific field. Gorman defines 'objectivity' to imply the unbiased behavior of the person, leaving aside the subjectivity in scientific studies (Gorman, 2018). The concept of objectivity as a journalistic ideology is the collection and sharing of information that describes reality as accurately as possible (Ryan, 2001: 3).

In summary, objectivity has developed as a concept of scientific origin, while finding a place in positive sciences, it was later evaluated in different fields. Journalism, which is the subject of the study, is at the head of these fields. The concept of objectivity as a journalism ideology based on news-making and transmission processes in the field of journalism draws a road map for journalists to take an objective and neutral attitude while avoiding subjectivity while creating and transmitting their news. One of the important conceptual definitions made in this field belongs to Schudson. According to him, objectivity is primarily a moral ideal and a guiding compass in organizing and reporting news applications. Moreover, for Schudson, objectivity criterion is a concept that helps the journalist to convey only the facts without any emotions and social values (Schudson, 2001: 150). Therefore, objectivity carries a function that gives importance to the reality of the event and the fact for the journalist. This function objectivity; makes it a guide during the preparation, writing and transmission of the news (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro et al. 2012: 3).

Objectivity is a set of professional codes created to protect journalists from legal events and criticism (Ryan, 2001: 10). For example, a journalist who is afraid of expressing his own ideas,

while expressing his theses, adorns this with citations and quotations and draws an objective journalist image. But this image puts objectivity only in a protective position. In the criticisms under this heading, it is pointed out that the media and journalists use objectivity like an armour. Using the requirements of objectivity as a weapon to justify its ideology or to demolish the opposing ideology has a shadow on objectivity. It should act from the necessity of enlightening the public with criteria such as objectivity, absolute reality and impartiality.

Journalists insist on their own truth instead of official findings (for example, whether a murder suspect is guilty or innocent). However, this advance provision reveals a situation that needs to be proved. However, journalists may believe that showing their own news while witnessing will reduce the reality of their own ideas. These approaches also harm objectivity. In addition, such a journalist misleads his readers who believe that he has obtained the news by acting objectively (Stoker, 1995: 11). The fact that journalists do not refer to the news in their news is directly contrary to the reality criteria of objectivity in the news. Because news that cannot be verified cannot be objective. It should be noted that citing sources of news reports is a major requirement for the objectivity of the news.

Objectivity and Media Strength

Objectivity ideology is used to make media power invisible, to strengthen cultural standards and public opinion (Friedman, 1998: 326). In this case, objectivity stands out as a concept that covers the media's driving power on society. The political, economic and cultural power behind the power of the media that provides information flow is thus hidden. The media hides the power of influencing the public and directs the decision-making mechanisms with the concept of objectivity. By acting like this, it sometimes serves the political institution and sometimes it serves economic capital. However, the media turns into an ideological device under all circumstances and strives for social engineering. In doing so, he uses objectivity like an invisibility potion. These criticisms, compiled by Ryan, are a kind of starting point for many criticisms brought to the objectivity of the media. In general, these criticisms are based on the framework that objectivity is used as armor by the media or that it is impossible to apply objectivity in today's conditions.

The Plausibility of Media Objectivity

The big questions here are, can objectivity be achieved in the practice of journalism? If objectivity is spirit of scientific inquiry, can objectivity be accomplished when the subject of analysis is human beings and human society? Can the method of pure and empirical sciences be employed in the art of journalism? In short, is objectivity ever possible in journalism? This raises the age long philosophical controversy between objectivists and subjectivists which has pitched philosophers at both ends of the spectrum. It is quite difficult to separate ones educational upbringing, religious background, cultural affiliation, socio-economic experiences, emotional life and other existential experiences which informs his/her worldview from the way he/she reasons and acts. These conditions his/her view of reality and approach to life. Since the journalist may be required to offer an interpretation and explanation of issues they write or talk about, they may consciously or unconsciously allow these personal experiences influence their judgment. As McDonald posits, "When the reporter moves from relatively uncomplicated, concrete, even physical phenomena into the realm of the abstract and complex...the value judgments he must take at every critical stage in his investigation of the facts must reflect the values he already holds" (McDonald, 1978). Thus, objectivity may be hampered by uncritical adherence to inherited value systems and world-views, conflict of interest at work place, government pressure, economic

interests, lack of exposure and so on. Being this as it may, a trained philosopher is expected to be objective in his analysis and presentation of facts. He never allow emotions or sentiments to override his sense of judgment.

There are many criticisms that objectivity is a utopia in the field of journalism. Although it is accepted that the media is neutral in theory, it is frequently stated by the critics that there are no objective media in practice. In particular, critical theorists have stated that the media hides the fact that they are not neutral using objectivity. Schiller states that it is a fact accepted by the media workers that the news has been away from fairness and neutrality from time to time. Stating that all media institutions are commercial institutions and they earn their income from advertising activities, Schiller emphasized that the media can't be objective (Gálik, 2019: 5). Employees are of the view that objectivity is possible in theory and in practice. Journalist Danelo considers objectivity as a myth, arguing that a masked subjectivity is dominant, and advocates the building of open and honest subjectivity by removing the objectivity mask (Danelo, 2018: 85). If you are happy; It states that the use of technical principles such as not hiding the source, not including the personal opinion in the news, and referring to the opposing views may provide objectivity in the news, but a type of objectivity that is predicted by theoretical approaches cannot be possible (Blaagaard, 2013: 1079). Journalists cannot apply objectivity in concrete journalistic activities due to both economic reasons and political pressures. Journalists, in a monopolized and conglomerated media system, show the concept of objectivity only to the extent permitted by their boss. Monopolization and market conditions turned the media into a commercial institution, so objectivity has been removed. Bosses who want to increase their profit shares within the corporate media system also avoid the concept of objectivity. In addition to this, journalists who have become executive positions in the media can take an elitist stance. At this point, media administrators' concerns such as public interest or objectivity are decreasing. In addition, commercial concerns with the movement, which does not sell objectivity to media executives at a major obstacle to the speed of the news process, and so it becomes impossible to implement (Ryan, 2001: 16- 17). All these criticisms reflect that the concept of objectivity is difficult to adopt and apply by journalists, while at the same time, it uses the concept of objectivity as a tool to hide the power and impartiality of the media. The media evacuates conceptually by commodifying objectivity to increase its dividend. In addition, the media can use the concept of objectivity to direct its audience and create a mass of tracks within its ideology. Interestingly, objectivity has become a means of hiding the reality of "not being objective" for the media.

CONCLUSION

Journalists who strive to be objective by taking social benefit, bypass events that contradict individual freedoms, or occur outside the public sphere. According to Glasser, journalists are denied that they are citizens with an objective understanding of journalism and are expected to be passive individuals in a political sense (cited by Ryan, 2001: 5). As a result, journalists' inquisitive and supervisory characteristics are weakened. According to this criticism, the element of personal responsibility, which is the basis of professional organizations such as law and medicine, is not in the field of communication. In this field, the writer or reporter works for an employer and takes over the responsibility of the employer instead of the writer or reporter (Ryan, 2001: 7). This situation causes the journalist not to take responsibility while composing his news or to fulfill the responsibility within the frame determined by the employer.

This paper also posits that objectivity enhances democratic politics to some extent. Journalists should be impartial in terms of the events and facts that are the subject of the news. This approach promotes critical thinking. The principle of objectivity, which advocates unbiased

reporting by journalists, however, it may not promote the development of new, progressive, or independent view (Durham, 1998: 125-126). According to those who brought these criticisms to objectivity; objective journalism apart from preventing critical subjective thoughts also prevents the formation of independent public opinion that may be divisive. The only benefit of subjectivism here is that it will create dissenting views, promotes opposition and tolerance, and the healthy functioning of the democratic system.

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