

Chapter 4

Who Watches the Watchdog?

Ethical Interrogation of Self-Censorship in the Nigerian Media

Taye C. Obateru

That a climate of fear pervades the journalism field globally hardly needs overstating. The situation is substantiated by the high number of journalists killed, jailed, harassed, or threatened in the course of their professional duties. The 2021 reports of Reporters Without Borders and the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) indicate an increase in global intolerance for independent journalism. CPJ reports that 293 journalists were detained last year, a figure it describes as a record high (cpj.org). CPJ also reports twenty-four targeted killings of journalists globally, a trend it views as a reflection of the brazen determination of governments to control and manage information access.

Similarly, Reporters Without Borders in its 2021 report reveals that 488 journalists were imprisoned and forty-six killed globally. It notes that although the number of journalists killed in 2021 dropped in comparison to previous years, the number of detentions were the highest so far recorded in more than twenty-five years of monitoring journalism practice globally (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

The situation in Nigeria is not different from the global picture. Detention and intimidation of journalists through various measures by state and non-state actors are known (ptcij.org). Government, especially, seems determined to curtail the freedom enjoyed by the news media, as well as freedom of expression using different guises. For example, the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ) said about 160 journalists were attacked

in Nigeria between 2018 and 2020 in a report on cases of abuse, harassment, detention, and intimidation of journalists in Nigeria. According to the report,

It does not help matters that Nigeria flouts its own multiple treaty obligations when it abuses its press and offers permission for its agents to violate the freedom of journalists, bloggers and those working in broadcast as well as allied public communication environments. (PTCIJ 2020: 5).

The Coalition for Whistleblower Protection and Press Freedom (CWPPF) has also in separate press statements expressed concern over what it called the growing trend of attacks on journalists and news media houses. It urged the government to take necessary action to end the attacks as they would threaten journalism practice and freedom of the press in Nigeria and thereby expose “a critical pillar for building and sustaining democracy in our country to jeopardy” (PTCIJ 2020: 5).

In addition to the harassment of journalists, anti-media legislation has either been passed or is being advocated by government and its agents (Adegboruwa 2021). Adegboruwa argues that the various actions of the Nigerian government such as the ban on Twitter, the planned Anti-Media Bill, etc., are affronts to freedom of expression. He argues:

Freedom of expression is of great importance to the human race wherein freedom of exchange of ideas promotes harmony and societal development, whilst suppression of freedom of expression often leads to conflict, instability and sometimes, outright revolution. When a people become chained through their mouths, then tyranny beckons” (Adegboruwa 2021: para. 12).

Abbasi et al. (2015) contend that the often cited grounds for attempting to curtail freedom of the news media, such as the need to protect public interest and for the maintenance of an orderly state, are mere veneers for the actual motive, which is to keep the people ignorant and uninformed. Be that as it may, are the efforts by state and non-state actors in different countries, including Nigeria, to curtail press freedom justified in any way as some have suggested? (See e.g., Abidde 2012; Golwa 2011; Idowu 2014; Nwabueze and Ebere 2013). Olorunyomi (2021) suggests that the unethical conduct of some journalists in Nigeria might justify attempts to curtail freedom of expression. He avers that freedom of expression, like any other right, is not absolute and should be enjoyed responsibly, stressing the importance of accountable journalism.

It is well known that Nigeria’s information minister, Lai Mohammed, has, in various speeches (analysed in a chapter in this book), been seeking to justify the government’s anti-media posture citing alleged acts of irresponsibility by some journalists. In one instance, he questioned the ethical justification

for journalists to be giving awards to public officers whom they are meant to watch over, saying this negates the role of journalism in a democracy (Punch 2021). *Punch* newspaper in its November 1, 2021, edition, aligned with the minister, positing that the news media conferring such awards on those they should watch over, and usually for pecuniary benefits, was undermining their watchdog role. The *Punch* editorial added:

A media pandering to the vanity of the ruling class and sending gratuitous messages of service where there is unmitigated ruin; competence where there is bland mediocrity and integrity where there is vile impropriety is caged. There is no iota of honour in such journalistic practices (Punch 2021: para. 2).

The views expressed by Olorunyomi, a renowned media owner, and the *Punch* newspapers cited above, coming from within the journalism profession itself, throw up the question of self-regulation within the journalism industry in Nigeria. This is because the infractions cited and others are at variance with the global ethical standard expected of journalism in general and the code of ethics of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) in particular. In addition, the digital revolution which has democratized information generation and dissemination has led to what has been described as the “abysmal collapse of editorial standard and, painfully, of ethical integrity” (Olorunyomi 2021: para. 25).

Giving this scenario, this chapter interrogates how the news media in Nigeria has been faring in its constitutional responsibility provided for in Section 22 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) of delivering the best value for democratic development, such as holding the government accountable to the people. Are journalists doing enough to self-regulate to ensure high ethical standards in professional journalism practice in Nigeria? How do journalists perceive self-censorship as a self-regulatory mechanism? Under what circumstances and in whose interest do journalists self-censor in the course of their professional duties? Does self-censorship amount to a curtailment of freedom of the press? How is self-censorship impacting journalism’s ability to deliver on its normative democratic obligation? These questions guided this study.

As noted earlier, accusations of unethical conducts of journalists in Nigeria are common. Journalism studies scholarship therefore continues to interrogate issues relating to journalism and how it can best deliver on its normative functions. The literature is replete with studies on ethical issues in journalism practice both within Nigeria and globally. Many of them, however, focus more on journalists in the field or their media organizations in interrogating ethical conduct. This chapter differs by focusing on editors who are at the apex of the “gatekeeping” ladder of news media organizations in seeking

answers to the research questions posed. This is informed by the fact that they receive the greatest pressure from various interests seeking to influence what is published, how it is published, and those unpublished.

ETHICS AND SELF-REGULATION

Professional ethics is grounded in the principle of making appropriate choices that serve the best interest of the profession and society. It is the process of determining actions that would be generally considered to be good and not bad (Alhassan and Abdulai 2019; Rodman 2007). Professional codes of ethics specify acceptable conduct accepted by members of a profession to serve as guide to correct behavior. It deals with what professionals must do in situations involving other people; that is, what we owe others and how we meet our responsibilities to them (Lorenz and Vivian 2005). Sanders (2003) viewed ethics as a study of factors influencing right or wrong behavior, while Alhassan and Abdulai (2019) argued that it goes beyond good and bad behavior to also cover value judgments about individual actions. Their position tallies with Frost (2015), who sees ethics as the principle guiding the decision-making process when individuals are faced with moral dilemmas. To Nasidi (2016), journalism ethics are the symbols and morals expected to be observed by journalists while discharging their professional duties. He posited that adhering to ethics is a demonstration of commitment to presenting facts objectively without bias or self-interest.

Adherence to Ethics

Code of ethics is thus a self-regulatory mechanism to make members of a professional body perform their duties ethically to attract respect and integrity to their profession (Rodman 2007). In this sense, adherence to ethics is critical to journalism as a profession because of journalism's influence in shaping public opinion. Another perspective views the journalism code of ethics as a mechanism to safeguard the independence of the profession in serving public interest (Baydar 2008). Baydar stated that they are essential for good and responsible journalism, which should be fair, accurate, and balanced, in addition to providing diversity of views that a story requires. In other words, journalism should be rooted in ethics, and editorial decisions should be guided by sound ethical considerations in line with journalism's normative obligation. Olorunyomi (2021) supports this position, pointing out that good journalism assists every ramification of society, particularly democracy, to do well. The Society for the Protection of Journalists (SPJ; 2011) described

journalism ethics as the concern for what holds society together and provides the stability and security essential to human existence.

From the various perspectives presented above, it is presumable that if journalists practice their profession in accordance with their code of ethics, journalism would be well placed to fulfill its democratic obligations to the Nigerian society. The question is, how well are journalists adhering to their code of ethics? The verdict in the literature is both positive and negative. Abidde (2012), for instance, indicated that journalists in Nigeria are often pandering to unethical practices that negate their role as the watchdog of society. He contended that the level of unethical conduct among journalists is capable of eroding public trust and confidence. Golwa (2011), in an assessment of the coverage of conflicts by news media, avered that they do not always live up to expectations in helping to douse tensions, but are rather influenced by sentiments and other interests. Idowu (2014), on his part while appraising the coverage of the abduction of the Chibok girls, observed that journalists were not adequately providing timely news and useful information on the development, thereby exposing a lack of commitment to professional duties. Also, Obateru (2020), in a study of the challenges confronting professional journalism practice in Nigeria, identifies the prevalence and influence of *brown envelope* as among the factors inhibiting high ethical standards in professional journalism practice in Nigeria.

On the other hand, journalists in Nigeria have been commended for their contributions to the development of the country at critical periods of its history. Adeyi et al. (2018) identify integration and bridge building, promoting economic reform, advocating popular participation, leadership engagement and education, engaging in political education, and promoting transparency and accountability as some contributions of journalism to nation building in Nigeria. Similarly, Olorunyomi (2021: para. 19) notes:

The Nigeria news media has earned a chest of badges on account of its vigorous case for independence and democracy, its redoubtable stance against three decades of ruinous military dictatorship, its consensus for national unity after the civil war, its historical anti-corruption posture particularly through the fourth republic, its strong public health campaigns through the Ebola, HIV, to the current COVID pandemic are all report card of excellence for the media.

The cited examples of the good journalism has done for the Nigerian society underscore its critical role in advancing the development of society and why it should strive to operate ethically for the benefit of society, no matter the ethical dilemmas that arise. A common ethical dilemma faced by journalists is how to strike a balance between the core journalism values, such as truth, accuracy, and objectivity, with the need to ensure society's

well-being. Should the truth be disseminated completely even if it can lead to chaos within society? Olorunyomi (2021) illustrates this dilemma when he, in one breath, stresses the importance of truth and accuracy in journalism, but in another breath, he says that conflict reporting requires some element of self-censorship because situations would worsen if reporters report them the way they are. According to him, “decision making in reporting and writing about conflict should incorporate the consequences of conflict by understanding the dynamics, adaptability and transformative condition of conflict” (para 9).

Nwabueze and Ebere (2013) and Golwa (2011) also stress the need for journalists to consider the likely consequences of their reports on the well-being of society while covering conflicts. Their views align with that of Brown and SPJ (2011), who opine that ethics is concerned with what holds society together and provides the stability and security needed for the peace of society. The various positions support the notion that whatever promotes the well-being of society is ethical, and this is where self-censorship comes in. What then is self-censorship?

Self-Censorship as a Self-Regulation Mechanism

Journalism studies scholarship seems to be in substantial unanimity on what constitutes self-censorship in journalism practice. There are, however, differing positions on the factors dictating it. Some of the views of scholars on self-censorship and self-regulation relevant to this study are presented below.

Self-censorship is when journalists choose to withhold or temper information at their disposal, not exactly as the facts portray, but with a consideration for the possible backlash from publishing the story as it is (Mijatovic 2013; Skjerdal 2008; White 2013). It is seen as a form of self-regulation by journalists as part of their normative obligation toward society. Self-censorship is also seen as an unwritten rule observed by journalists based on the assumed interest of the editor, the proprietors, the government, or the editorial policy of the news organization (Skjerdal 2008). Skjerdal views it as a kind of routine in many newsrooms because “journalists know what they are expected to cover, who to interview and how to present the item to satisfy the editors” (p. 192).

Skjerdal also distinguishes what he identified as active self-censorship, which is a situation where journalists withhold or temper information already gathered because of the possible tension it might generate in society, and passive self-censorship, which relates to the deliberate refusal of a journalist or the news desk to cover an issue for different reasons. This could be likened to journalists creating “no-go” areas in their coverage.

Passive self-censorship, Skjerdal (2008: 194) contends, “prevents reporting the whole picture and is a major factor in the increasing dissatisfaction among journalists.” White (2014) agrees that journalists daily made several ethical decisions in choice of content such as headlines, words use, pictures, etc., which does not necessarily amount to self-censorship. She submits:

All good journalism is subject to editing, reporting or other functional alteration in the name of style, taste, precision and clarity. This is not internal censorship, but the application of sound editorial judgement when the only limits are those posed by the journalists’ own knowledge, competence and creativity (para. 4).

She also avers that what constitutes self-censorship is when journalism is not driven by the principles of good journalism but by fear or that of reprisal from the state, security agencies, the proprietor, or the advertisers. She admits that journalists sometimes self-censor out of misplaced notions of national interest and patriotism, noting that the fear of reprisals undermines press freedom or independent journalism. In this regard, the question arises, where is the line between editorial decisions based on the need to avoid inflaming an already tense situation and decisions based on fear or personal interest? This remains a subject of debate in journalism studies discourse.

However, as Uzunoglu (2018) contends, it is true that some journalists engage in self-censorship for selfish reasons such as the struggle to survive. Pate and Dauda (2020) also agree that journalists face multidimensional threats arising from the manner in which they report particular issues, which may not please those involved. Alhassan and Abdulai (2019) buttress this, citing the ethical dilemmas journalists in Northern Ghana face in making sound moral decisions in stressful economic circumstances, such as difficulty in meeting the basic requirements of life for themselves and their dependents. Their finding is in tandem with a similar study on professional journalism practice in Nigeria which reports that journalists are constantly in a kind of *survival struggle* between upholding professional ethics and meeting basic financial and other commitments as a result of poor remuneration (Obateru 2020).

The perspectives on how journalists can employ self-censorship for selfish interests cited above underscore the importance of self-regulation mechanisms to check such tendencies. This will ensure that the pursuit of personal interests is not used as a façade to self-censor and jeopardize journalism’s responsibility to society. As White (2013: 66) asserts, “journalism must always be a quality brand defined by ethical standards.” Journalism would then be able to fulfil its critical role of promoting transparency and accountability in governance. Adeyi et al. (2018: 46) also argue that “it is the responsibility of the mass media to mobilize all sectors of the nation and

their actors to key into the task of nation building. In so doing, it will promote accountability in governance, ensure that both the private and public sectors operate in the general interest of the state.”

Theoretical Interrogation

As pointed out earlier, ethics are rooted in some philosophies or principles. Vivian and Maurin (2000) submit that the various approaches to ethics can be divided into two broad categories, which are *deontological* ethics and *teleological* ethics. Deontological, also known as *absolutist* ethics, postulates that adherence to ethics is a matter of duty, and that people are bound to act morally by following good rules. Deontologists liken ethics to religious prescriptions which, once followed, would ensure *right living*. Vivian and Maurin (2000) identify five deontological approaches or ethical theories:

- Theory of divine command, which holds that proper moral decisions come from obeying God’s commands with a blind trust (faith) that the outcome/consequence will be good
- Theory of divine right of kings, which is hinged on the principle that the king or monarch can do no wrong and that allegiance to the monarch is divine and virtuous
- Theory of secular command, which stresses allegiance to a political leader from whom the people take cues in taking moral decisions
- Libertarian theory, which believes in the human ability to think through problems and that people almost always make morally right decisions
- Categorical imperative theory, which argues that it is imperative for people to identify and do what is right, and holds that people should do what is right unconditionally every time

However, the postulations of the deontological theories have been faulted on the ground that ethical questions are sometimes complicated and not as simple or clearcut as proposed by the theories to warrant an easy choice (Vivian and Maurin 2000). This is a fact because journalists often find themselves making choices between the right of the people to be informed and the possible consequences of presenting the facts as they are.

Teleological or situational ethics on its part is concerned with the consequences of actions taken. It submits that blind allegiance to rules as proposed by deontologists could result in greater damage, hence the need to weigh possible consequences in taking ethical decisions. The ethical theories under the teleological philosophical standpoint according to Vivian and Maurin (2000) are:

- Pragmatic Theory—proposes that ethical decisions should be based on previous human experience on the possible consequences of an action
- Utilitarian Theory—encourages basing ethical decisions on actions that would benefit more people than they harm, and advocates the principle of *the greatest good for the greatest number*
- Social Responsibility Theory—propounds that ethical decisions should be based on the good effect the action would have on society and how it would contribute to overall societal good

However, the teleological approach has also been faulted as lacking in guiding principles and being imperfect in foresight. Critics argue that ethical decisions should be rooted in moral principles and not on fluid ones.

This chapter agrees that the deontological and teleological positions have their strengths and weaknesses in their propositions on ethical decisions. Since ethics are important to the well-being of society and key to upholding the moral and cultural values, it is important for human actions to be guided by some form of ethical principles. Journalism especially derives its legitimacy from expected roles which are best served by sound ethical conduct. To that extent, the chapter aligns more with the teleological standpoint, which stresses consideration for the consequences of ethical decisions. The utilitarian and social responsibility arguments are apposite and would best serve the interest of journalism as a profession. If ethical decisions by journalists are based on what would benefit the greatest number (utilitarian philosophy) and consideration for what would do society good (social responsibility), such as promoting good governance, a lot would be achieved.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a qualitative interrogation of how self-censorship as a self-regulation mechanism drives professional journalism practice in Nigeria. It focused on editors of news media organizations (print, broadcast, and online) who are at the top of the editorial decision-making hierarchy of news organisations. Editors were chosen because they arguably face the greatest pressures from different quarters on what to publish or when to publish. They also go through a lot of ethical dilemmas when deciding on how to handle particular developments within the ambit of the law and what is good for society. They were considered to be the most appropriate to provide answers to the questions raised by this study.

An online interview guide produced on Google Docs was used as instrument of data collection. Online interview is a new trend in qualitative data gathering which addresses the problem of distance or physical access to

potential participants experienced in physical or face-to-face interactions (Salmons 2012). Opara *et al.* (2021) also notes that semi-structured, web-based, written interviews are becoming a practical alternative to traditional face-to-face or telephone interviews and that Google Docs are being increasingly used as an online qualitative data collection method. This is in view of its advantages, which include easier access to individuals or groups, ensured privacy and anonymity, and removal of the need for transcription since the responses are in written form. Although the method has the disadvantages of not allowing the researcher to read non-verbal cues such as moods and emotions and limits the level of rapport and engagement that allows the interviewer to present themselves as trustworthy, the advantages best serve the interest of this study, hence its adoption.

The link for the interview guide was sent to editors across different online platforms, such as email and social media, using a snowball sampling approach. Editors known to the researcher were requested to send the link to colleague editors to widen the sample net. The target sampling size was thirty, whereby the first thirty responses received would be countenanced, but only twenty-two responses were eventually received. Of the twenty-two respondents, whose years of experience as editors ranged from eleven months to thirty-one years, seven were from government-owned news media, while fifteen were from privately owned news media. Six of them were from broadcast media, four from online, and twelve from print. The twenty-two responses therefore served as data for this study. Codes ED1–22 were allocated to the participants for data analysis (see table of participants below).

Table 4.1 shows a list of the participants, the news media they represent, and their years of experience (source: the author).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and analyzes the data gathered from the online interviews with twenty-two editors from different media organizations in Nigeria. An analysis of the responses to the interview guide produced the following findings:

1. The participants exercise self-censorship frequently, primarily as a social responsibility and self-regulation mechanism toward public good, but also to satisfy other interests when occasions call for it.
2. Participants do not see self-censorship as interfering with freedom of the press so long as it is employed to promote true democracy and general well-being of society.
3. The existing regulatory and professional frameworks need to be strengthened to foster high ethical standards in journalism practice.

Table 4.1. Summary of Participants.

<i>CODE</i>	<i>ORGANIZATION</i>	<i>PRIVATE/ PUBLIC</i>	<i>NATURE OF MEDIA</i>	<i>EXPERIENCE AS EDITOR</i>
ED1	Tribune/Punch/Tell/ Emancipator	Private	Print	31 years
ED2	Plateau Publishing Corp.	Government	Print	2 years
ED3	The Cable	Private	Online	11 months
ED4	TG News Online	Private	Online	7 years
ED5	AshenewsDaily.com	Private	Online	2 years
ED6	Nigeria Standard	Government	Print	8 years
ED7	Saturday Vanguard	Private	Print	6 years
ED8	Vanguard	Private	Print	10 years
ED9	Nigerian Tribune	Private	Print	8 years
ED10	Silverbird TV	Private	Broadcast	13 years
ED11	NewsTide247.com	Private	Online	3 years
ED12	Nasarawa Newsday	Private	Print	9 years
ED13	Daily Newswatch	Private	Print	2 years
ED14	Radio Nigeria	Government	Broadcast	10 years
ED15	Nigerian Television Authority	Government	Broadcast	3 years
ED16	This Day	Private	Print	15 years
ED17	Plateau Radio Television Corp	Government	Broadcast	5 years
ED18	Daily Trust	Private	Print	10 years
ED19	Radio Nigeria	Government	Broadcast	10 years
ED20	The Punch	Private	Print	10 years
ED21	Channels TV	Private	Broadcast	5 years
ED22	Nigerian Television Authority	Government	Print	12 years

4. Some journalists exploit self-censorship to pursue unethical personal agendas.

The findings are hereby discussed thematically in relation to the research questions.

Participants' Understanding of Self-Censorship

Data showed that all the respondents have a fair knowledge of what self-censorship entails. Most of them also understand that self-censorship should be exercised for public good in line with journalism's normative obligation to society, as well as to satisfy other interests. Some of the views on what self-censorship is illustrate this:

"When editors, publishers and other news gatekeepers are selective about what is for public consumption." (ED3)

“Exercising restraint on what to publish and what not to publish in the overall interest of the society.” (ED8)

“Refusal to publish a news item that is factual because of considerations for national security, ownership, and economic interests.” (ED17)

“Self-censorship arises when an editor is processing a material for publication and decides on his own, without prompting from any quarters, to suppress some information to protect some interests which may be pecuniary or relational. An editor may censor himself and throw away a story that comes to his table if it will harm the image of his employer, his friends, or his relations.” (ED7)

Many of the respondents said they exercise self-censorship in the public interest but also acknowledged that ownership, government, advertisers, and personal interests also play roles in determining what to publish. This confirms the findings by Alhassan and Abdulai (2019), who found that the personal interests of journalists also influence their editorial decisions. Their study established that stressful economic concerns create ethical dilemmas and influence journalists’ editorial decisions in Northern Ghana. Uzunoglu (2018) also found that journalists engage in self-censorship for reasons outside of public interest, such as the struggle to survive.

It is therefore clear that while the essence of self-censorship, as explained by respondents, is to protect public good, which is in line with the normative obligations of journalism, self-censorship can be deployed by journalists unethically to pursue selfish agendas. Since it is almost impossible to eliminate such in any profession, the onus lies on professional and other regulatory bodies to ensure proper monitoring and exert appropriate sanctions in accordance with rules and codes of ethics when such infractions occur. This would serve as a deterrent and reduce unethical tendencies. The motive for editorial decisions should be in line with ethical principles such as those of the utilitarian and social responsibility theories.

Factors Influencing Self-Censorship

This study also sought to know what factors guide editors’ decisions to self-censor, listing five options from which to tick as many as were applicable. Fifteen chose ownership interest, nineteen chose public interest, and sixteen picked ethical interest. Government regulation was chosen by twelve, while ten chose personal safety concerns. This corroborates the position that various factors influence editorial decisions. As the data shows, while a majority of respondents picked public interest as one of the factors guiding their editorial decision-making, those who chose ownership interest are also many. The number of those who base their self-censorship decisions on

ethical interest is equally significant, indicating that ethical considerations also play a role. This is important because, as Baydar (2008) observes, there will be less need for government or other agencies to want to tamper with the independence of the news media if journalists operate ethically.

Be that as it may, it needs to be emphasized that, just as some of the respondents noted, editorial decision-making is not always easy because of the pressures exacted on editors from different quarters. For example, what does an editor do when the proprietor of his medium insists that a story be *killed* or presented in a particular way, or an advertiser threatens to pull out an advertisement which is helping to sustain the medium if a story is not published as he wants? However, this chapter supports Olorunyomi (2021) that ethics should be at the heart of all editorial engagements because if editors are guided by ethical principles like the utilitarian theory, which prescribes considerations for what guarantees the greatest good for the greater number, it will assist journalism to fulfill its democratic obligation to Nigeria.

Impact of Self-Censorship on Journalism and Press Freedom

Another key finding of this study is that a majority of the respondents do not feel that self-censorship negates freedom of the press if deployed for good reasons, as a necessary measure to assist journalists to demonstrate responsibility for society's well-being. Two of the responses are presented here:

"It can promote peaceful co-existence, especially during religious or ethnic tension. It can also reduce government interference in the media." (ED5)

"The democratization of information dissemination which has resulted in an explosion of information and dangerous commentary has made it more pertinent than ever to have as many reliable, balanced and fair platforms as possible. Hence, the onus is on us to self-censor to enjoy the trust of the public." (ED3)

But there is no unanimity on the issue, as a number of the respondents hold a different view from the majority. Rather, they view self-censorship as a betrayal of public trust and an inhibition to press freedom. Here are some of the views:

"Self-censorship has a negative impact on journalism and freedom of the press by denying the general public the needed information. It makes journalists tilt reports to favour a few at the detriment of the majority." (ED22)

"When deployed inappropriately, it negates objectivity and professionalism." (ED1)

“It may detract from the tenets of journalism, but it is necessary.” (ED20)

“It impedes free flow of information and makes investigative journalism difficult.” (ED10)

“With time as an editor, you find yourself overdoing the self-censorship because the lines become somewhat blurred and you might not know where to stop.” (ED16)

The above responses show that even though most editors do not see self-censorship as negative to journalism and freedom of expression, but rather as a demonstration of commitment to promoting democracy, peace, and good governance, it could also have its negative sides, as some other respondents observed. This therefore calls for a conscious assessment of motives for deploying self-censorship. In this regard, Brown and SPJ’s (2011: 2) postulation seems apt:

The best approach to taking ethical decisions is to “ask the right questions” as to why one is taking a particular decision; if the decision makes sense and if the reasoning is explainable to other people sensibly, then a sound, defensible ethical decision would have been taken.

Self-Censorship as a Self-Regulatory Mechanism

“Self-censorship is a self-assigned burden or, better still, self-assigned slavery which editors have imposed on themselves to the pains of the people.” (ED12)

The above quotation from one of the respondents is additional evidence that not all are comfortable with the notion of self-censorship and how it impacts journalism. As some of the other views cited for the other questions show, there are journalists who feel that the people are shortchanged when certain information is withheld for whatever reasons. Be that as it may, most other respondents felt that the obligation to ensuring a peaceful society should rank higher in determining what to publish. Some responses in this regard are presented below:

“Releasing certain information at journalists’ disposal to the public could be detrimental to societal cohesion, so it becomes an obligation to withhold such for the general good.” (ED6)

“If the publication at hand would cause problems within society, I think it is best to find a way of passing the message without divulging the harmful facts.” (ED20)

framework for monitoring the activities of their members. In line with this, Brown and SPJ (2011) observe that journalism is increasingly finding itself spending a lot of time clarifying and apologizing for ethical lapses. Therefore, an effective self-regulatory framework is imperative, particularly in this digital era where all manner of publications are springing up and purporting to be practicing journalism.

CONCLUSION

This chapter interrogated the ethical factors influencing editorial decision-making and the role self-censorship plays in the process. Online interviews with twenty-two editors who are at the apex of the editorial decision-making ladder in news organizations generated data that shows, among others, that journalists view self-censorship as a duty in the self-regulation process of ensuring a peaceful and prosperous society and in fulfilling their democratic obligation as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. The study established that various ethical dilemmas arise in the process of deciding between what is ethically correct and what would best serve the interests of the people and democracy. It submits that amidst the pressures, journalists should opt for choices that advance the cause of democracy which are the best way to achieve the greatest good for the largest number, which the Utilitarian Ethical Theory preaches.

Consciousness of what is the best for society is essential because, as Mijatovic (2013) notes, the internet and media convergence have led to the dilution of long-established boundaries among different media and transformed the way people consume the media. Self-regulation by journalists is thus paramount in an increasingly complicated media environment to promote media accountability and, as Haraszti (2008) argues, reduce the need for government interference in form of regulation.

If journalism would fulfill its democratic obligation to Nigeria as enshrined in Section 22 of the country's constitution, it needs to demonstrate more commitment to self-regulation. Self-regulation holds the key to ensuring the high ethical standards and appropriate mechanisms needed to be put in place to bring this about.

REFERENCES

- Abbasi, Irum Saeed, and Al-sharqi, Laila. "Media Censorship: Freedom versus Responsibility." *Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution* 7, no. 4 (August 2015): 21–25. <https://doi.org/10.5897/JLCR2015.0207>.

- Abidde, Sabella. "Journalism in Contemporary Nigeria." *Punch*, July 25, 2012. <https://www.punchng.com>.
- Adegboruwa, Egun-Olu. "Criminalization of Freedom of Expression." *The Guardian*, December 2, 2021. <https://guardian.ng/opinion/criminalization-of-the-freedom-of-expression/>.
- Adeyi, Ezekiel Major, Nimchak, Emmanuel, and Olorunsuwa, Elijah. "The Media and Democratic Culture." In *The Mass Media and Political Consciousness in Nigeria*, edited by Taye C. Obateru, pp. 40–53. Jos: Jos University Press, 2018.
- Alhassan, Amin, and Abdulai, Muhammed. "Managing Ethical Dilemmas under Stressful Economic Circumstances among Journalists in Northern Ghana." *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communication* 5, no. 3 (July 2018): 193–212. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajmmc.5-3-3>.
- Baydar, Yavuz. "Setting up a Journalistic Code of Ethics: The Core of Media Self-regulation." In *The Media Self-Regulation Guidebook: All the Questions and Answers*, edited by Adeline Hulin and John Smith, pp. 21–32. Vienna: OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2008.
- Brown, Fred, and Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). "Ethical Thinking: History and Definitions." In *A Casebook of Professional Conduct for New Media* (4th ed.), edited by Fred Brown and SPJ, pp. 1–11. Portland: Marion Street Press.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. "Attacks on the Press: The Deadliest Countries in 2021." CPJ, January 19, 2022. <https://cpj.org/reports/2022/01/attacks-on-the-press-the-deadliest-countries-in-2021/>.
- Frost, Chris. *Journalism Ethics and Regulation*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Golwa, Joseph. "The Media and Conflict Management in Nigeria: How Far, How Effective in a Transitional Democracy?" In *Media, Conflict and Peace Building in Nigeria*, edited by Joseph Golwa, and Joseph Ochogwu, pp. 89–112. Abuja: Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2011.
- Haraszi, Miklos. "The Merits of Media Self-Regulation: Balancing Rights and Responsibilities." In *The Media Self-Regulation Guidebook: All the Questions and Answers*, edited by Adeline Hulin and John Smith, pp. 9–20. Vienna: OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2008.
- Idowu, Lanre. "Chibok and the Failure of Reporting." *Vanguard Online*, July 2, 2014. <https://vanguardngr.com>.
- Lorenz, Alfred Lawrence, and Vivian, John. *News: Reporting and Writing*. Delhi: Pearson Education, 2005.
- Maurus, Veronique. "The Ombudsman: Media Self-Regulation within a News Outlet." In *The Media Self-Regulation Guidebook: All the Questions and Answers*, Edited by Adeline Hulin and John Smith, pp. 67–84. Vienna: OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2008.
- Mijatovic, Dunja. "Foreword." In *The Online Media Self-Regulation Guidebook*, edited by Adeline Hulin and Mike Stone, pp. 5–6. Vienna: OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2013.
- Nasidi, Quaribu Yahaya. "Media and Ethics: Journalism Ethics in Nigerian News Media." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 21, no. 12 (December 2016): 1–6.

- Nwabueze, Chinenye, and Ebere, Emelda. "Mass Media Relevance in Combating Insecurity in Nigeria." *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 861–870.
- Obateru, Taye C. *Brown Envelope and News Media Practice in Nigeria*. Jos: Jos University Press, 2020.
- Olorunyomi, Dapo. "Media in Times of Crisis: Resolving Conflicts, Achieving Consensus." *Premium Times*, October 21, 2021. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/491021-media-in-times-of-crisis-resolving-conflict-achieving-consensus-by-dapo-olorunyomi.html>.
- Oprara, Victoria, Spangsdorf, Sabrina, and Ryan, Michelle K. "Reflecting on the Use of Google Docs for Online Interviews: Innovation in Qualitative Data Collection." *Qualitative Research* 0, no. 0 (2021): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211045192>.
- Pate, Umar A., and Dauda, Sharafa. "Threats to Media Freedom and the Safety of Journalists in Nigeria." In *Handbook of Research on Combating Threats to Media Freedom and Journalist Safety*, edited by Sadia Jamil, pp. 241–256. Hershey: IGI Global, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-1298-2.ch013>.
- Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ). *State of Press Freedom Reports: Trends and Reflections*. 2020. <https://ptcij.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/State-of-Press-Freedom-Report.pdf>.
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF). *World Press Freedom Index: Journalism, the Vaccine Against Disinformation Blocked in More Than 130 Countries*. Reporters Without Borders, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>.
- Rodman, George. *Mass Media in a Changing World: History, Industry, Controversy*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2007.
- Salmons, Janet. "Designing and Conducting Research with Online Interviews." In *Cases in Online Research*, edited by Janet Salmons, pp. 1–30. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012.
- Sanders, Karen. *Ethics and Journalism*. London: Sage Publications, 2003.
- Skjerdal, Terje, S. "Self-Censorship Among News Journalists in the Ethiopian State Media." *African Communication Research* 1, no. 20 (September 2008): 185–206.
- Uzunoglu, Sarphan. "Between Self-Censorship and Self-Regulation: Journalism in Gray But New Media." In *Media Self-Regulation in Turkey: Challenges, Opportunities, Suggestions*, edited by Yasemin Congar, Fatma Demirelli, and Secil Epik, pp. 237–267. Istanbul: P24 Media Library, 2018.
- Vivian, John, and Maurin, Peter J. *The Media of Mass Communication*. 2nd ed. Scarborough: Allyn and Bacon Canada, 2000.
- White, Aidan. "Ethics and Digital Journalism." In *The Online Media Self-Regulation Guidebook*, edited by Adeline Hulin and Mike Stone, pp. 60–73. Vienna: OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2013.
- White, Aidan. "Fear in the News: The Difference Between Self-Censorship and Ethical Journalism." *Ethical Journalism Network Blog*, May 2, 2014. <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/fear-in-the-news-the-difference-between-self-censorship-and-ethical-journalism>.