

Ethics Search in Africa and The Potential of Personal Morals

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Introduction

One profound characteristic of the global discourse in the search for acceptable ethics for journalism practice is its imperativeness. There are a few contradistinctive arguments against the need for a functional ethical guide. Debates on the requisite standard of achievement have intensified as scholars struggle to assert perspectives that transcend geographic and cultural barriers. Well heard in these debates are those voices that proceed from the neoliberal epistemic structures. Their vantage positions brought about, among others, by their pioneering forays into media practice, financial strength and global influence have created preponderant positions which some opine as the archetype. But Pal and Dutta (2008, 2008b) discuss globalization from below with respect to the subaltern voices that are located at the receiving end of global inequalities and who are generally situated in Africa and other developing areas of the world. Scholars representing these subaltern voices of the global South have also evinced their ethical perspectives which they think should not be ignored. Therefore, it has been an epistemological contest between the mainstream neoliberal actors and their subaltern counterparts in an intellectual struggle that has remained unabated even as theoretical underpinning for global ethics remains inconclusive.

The weakness of the western system as the acceptable global standard has elicited the movement that puts scholars from Africa under the scholarship radar. *Afrocentricism* (Asante, 1991) asserts that any typical phenomena should be studied from the perspective of the African. Afrocentricism seeks a graduated replacement of foreign paradigms with the things that

are in the interest of Africa (Mazama, 2001) and it wouldn't make any difference whether or not such systematic displacements are in accordance with the western systems (Reviere, 2001). However, according to Omojola (2008, p.176), applying the afrocentrist perspective in the search for global ethics can be counterproductive owing to the fragility of the epistemology. It seems to promote the theory of elimination by substitution and advances provincialism to the detriment of the globalizing world. The reason why provincialism is worrisome is because the typical audience of journalism is no longer provincial but globalized.

The works of Rao and Wasserman (2007) typify the complementarist perspective which advocates the multidisciplinary approach to ethics searching. It recognizes protonorms across each culture and reinscribes indigenous values and practices into the global search. It does not discountenance the existence of neoliberal ethical systems but frowns at the overbearing universalism associated with it. This perspective promotes the community as the "center of life" (Israel, 1992, p.412) and offers a subaltern view of humanity that appropriates the interest of an individual as the interest of the community. It is a case of "I am because we are" (Moemeka, 1997, p. 174). According to Omojola (2008, p. 177):

Evidence from two ethical subtheories, ubuntu from South Africa and Ahimsa from India, were provided by Rao and Wasserman to justify their arguments. Ahimsa dissuades journalists from publishing contents that can harm their audience. Ubuntu is consistent with the belief that ethical perspectives are closely related to culture. This subtheory offers a view of truth, authority, and justice on the platform of humanity whereby one's interest only obtains meaning when the interests of others are involved and pursued.

The search for a global ethical system for journalists is understandable. Unlike in the past, the media of today are generally global in ideas, reach and impact whether they are the transnational media corporation or carefree blogger. The globalized idea emerged as a result of the increasing cheaper access of the audience to the Internet which agglomerates variegated media forms – print, broadcast and New Media. While there are ethical universals (e.g. objectivity, fairness, avoidance of libelous reporting and the like), which all practitioners are presumed to subscribe to, it has been challenging to agree on a common ground of ethics, a situation aggravated by the cultural variances that characterize the competing

intellectual communities.

Objective of the Study

This article attempts to justify, in the African context, the importance of the ethical individual in the practice of socially responsible journalism. Many writings have located ethics in the individual. For instance, Ibarra-Collado, Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger (2006, p.45) see ethics in the “relation between individual morality and organizationally prescribed principles assumed to guide personal actions” where the individual exercises the choice of how ethical he or she is and the management of that choice. Christian, Rao, Ward and Wasserman (2008, p. 139) have also talked about viewing innovation in the development of an ethical system as “expressions of the basic values and commitments of being human” as “individual journalists search for guidelines that would help them meet their responsibility toward their public within their particular set of local demands and conditions.” This article expands the debate and asserts that for any ethical school to succeed, it must transmute to the level of the individual. This paper does not frown at the formalism associated with different ethical schools but contends that formalism should not reside only in the domain of global North or different perspectives that seek relevance in the search for acceptable universals. It argues in favor of a perspective that contextualizes formalism from self.

The assertion here is a reverse engineering or backward transposition of ethical formalism from a generic or scholastic epistemology to the self. This attempt advises ethical searchers to picture formalism around self, where self is used to represent the individual professional journalist who has a social responsibility to perform toward an audience that sustains him or her in the business. This paper de-emphasizes the Platonist syllogism and its transitivity of pairwise relationship whereby if:

$$aPb \text{ and } bPc, \text{ then } aPc$$

i.e If *a* is preferred to *b* and *b* is preferred to *c*, then *a* is preferred to *c*. This makes *a* an influence over the remaining two values, where *a* is generic epistemology, *b* is an ethical school and *c* is an ethical individual. The idea here is such that though *c* may not be necessarily preferred to *b* or *a*, *c* should be considered as having the requisite standard or utility value comparable to *b* or *a*. This article argues that it is time scholars began to see

the merit in the formalization of personal ethics as a guide for journalism practice.

It is not usually so that qualified journalists and professional communicators do not take personal morals seriously in the discharge of their duties, as an undisciplined journalist is a risk to his employer and audience. It is not that personal morals are not reckoned with in the discharge of duties but one striking challenge is that they are assumed in most cases. Little or no consideration has been given to formalized personal ethics as a reliable source of standard for media practice. It is common to regard it as a mere adjacency to any ethical standard.

The Challenges of the Global Search for Ethics

A. Journalism Practice and the Challenge of Multi-stakeholders

The ongoing search for acceptable and all-encompassing ethical universals is more of a minority program than majority. This minoritization makes the search process linearistic, which presents journalists, media scholars and the audience of the media as all that exist, thus narrowing the dialogic space available. For instance, most or all the recurring ethical concepts of objectivity, fairness, privacy, libel and the like all have pervasive reference to journalists in the way they relate to their audiences. Omojola (2008, pp.173-187) gives a convincing detail of a number of stakeholders whose interests must be considered in order to have a robust engagement in the search process. These are the following:

- Media Scholars: They are regarded as the custodian of knowledge in the search and they are the ones who teach and graduate students as journalists.
- Journalists: These are the professional communicators that are in the eye of the storm. They are at the center of the search for the global search. The purpose of searching is mainly about them.
- Newsmakers: They are the ones that supply the raw materials that journalists refine in their news mill. Without them, journalism ceases to exist as a formalized profession.
- Media users: These are the media content consumers who pay for what they consume to keep the media business running.
- Media owners: They are the ones that journalists and professional

communicators apply to for employment. Media can be owned publicly or privately. Where a journalist owns his or her own media outfit, he or she is no longer merely a journalist but journalist/businessman.

- Professional Associations: In neoliberal democracies, they work to protect the interest of journalists and they are the custodians and enforcers of ethical standards.
- Government and Regulatory Agencies: Governments do not simply fold their arms while the media operate. A government is empowered to issue out licences to broadcast station owners, register newspapers, and set up other statutory bodies to help in monitoring and regulation activities.
- Media Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs): These are usually privately-funded local or foreign organizations that play advocacy roles regarding the welfare of journalists and in things that make them perform their social responsibility well.

The prioritization of media scholars, their intellectual offspring journalists and the audience of the media exemplify the problem of a constant error that introduces a systemic bias to a population and consistently epitomizes a part of a population to the neglect of other equally vital parts. This constant error has perpetuated a unidirectional flow of discourse on global ethics search which has remained to the present time. If the ethical diversities from the stakeholders are considered in the global search, it is most likely that the journalist will emerge at the center of multifarious ethical profiles.

This potential ethical summation for the journalist is not exaggerated. The compulsion of a journalist operating under some alienist values is not a pronounced occurrence in some other professions say, medicine. If a patient approaches a physician, the likelihood exists that the physician would not have to subject himself to the ethics of the patient before he carries out his duty. If, in case, some values around the patient are considered, it will not be to compel the doctor but aid in a proper diagnosis and prognosis. If on the other hand the doctor visits, the ethical values that operate in the patient's environment will have to be taken into cognizance. But the doctor, unlike the journalist, can insist that the patient is better off in his hospital rather than in the patient's house. The journalist does not have this luxury of insistence. The choice of the journalist, operating in a multi-ethical environment, is therefore limited as he or she has to operate within rules laid down by employer, newsmaker and, to some extent, advertisers,

among others.

B. Variegated Media and Incursion of Emergency Journalism

The field of media keeps widening by the day-aviation journalism, business journalism, judiciary reporting, etc. Therefore, looking for a standard that fits all may be elusive owing to potential implementation problems. Each branch has its peculiarities as a judiciary reporter knows he has to be more discreet in his reporting than, say, an entertainment reporter. A reason for this is that the rules and standards that operate in the judicial environment have similarities, but are not the same, with those that obtain in entertainment. For instance, a journalist needs the strict permission of the judge to use his camera in court while the same reporter may not have to observe such a strict rule to work in the entertainment industry. This implies that the peculiarities that characterize a type of reporting are explainable not only from the domain of journalism practice but also outside of it. Aviation correspondents will have to operate in a situation not exactly the same as that of a war correspondent as the rules guiding them are different and in some cases are diametrically opposed.

The case of the multifarious media is compounded by the uncontrolled incursion of emergency journalists who take advantage of modern technology, sophisticated social media tools and unregulated Internet activity to practise what some erroneously refer to as citizen journalism but which is more of paramedia journalism since they are amateurs. The phrase emergency journalism is more appropriate for the obvious reasons of no training, no affiliation, lack of credibility and barefaced anonymity that characterize such reporting.

The concept of emergency in journalism practice is made more manifest by the recognition accorded it by professional journalists in the quest of media owners to make their audience the first to know. This has resulted in unrestricted acknowledging of emergency sources which imply the granting of credence to such sources. For instance, during the London bombing of July 2005, the well known British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) received and acknowledged no fewer than 30,000 materials in amateur photographs, audio and video, short media messages (MMS) and e-mails. Acknowledgment from such a huge media outfit creates a profile of acceptance of spontaneous journalism as gap filler. This means a reduced cost implication which is appreciated more often by the media owners than professional communicators since news item has been commoditized.

While the credibility of emergency journalism is a concern that is subject to debate, its usefulness cannot be over-questioned. There is little doubt that advent of journalism practice by ordinary persons has widened the reportorial space. Their presence seems to have resolved, to some noticeable extent, the demand of newsmen to be everywhere at all times. Furthermore, their activity has not only enhanced the discourse environment but also promoted global civic vitality unknown before the modern age.

The area where the problem is highly pronounced is ethics. While scholars still battle for the establishment of an acceptable global system for professionals, it is likely going to be an extra burden to search for any ethical universal for an amateurish practice that does not ask for such in the first instance. The systematic development of the journalism profession which appropriates education, training, passion, and in most cases, experience is non-existent in emergency journalism. This makes it difficult for the amateur practitioner to articulate the ethical fundamentals of objectivity and fairness and put them into practice. Creating standards for paramedia practitioners becomes almost impossible. This presents a situation where self ethics are worth being considered.

Conceptualizing the Self

This paper is not a critique of the several perspectives in cognitive research or personalist philosophy. But it is important to appreciate the fact that the issue of self has been the preoccupation of philosophers from a long time. Immanuel Kant (1781, 1798) described two perspectives of the consciousness of self-empirical self-consciousness and transcendental apperception. The former is the consciousness of oneself and one's psychological states in inner sense which is about a faculty that synthesizes past experiences and where the self becomes conscious of itself as the subject. The latter describes the consciousness of oneself and one's states in the context of performing the acts of apperception. The source of the inner consciousness is the inner sense. Kant did not elucidate these definitions, perhaps a reason why his works fell into oblivion for a long time until they became a source of discourse only in the early 21st century.

William James (1890) categorized the self into three: physical self, mental self and spiritual self. Neisser (1988) and Neisser and Jopling (1997)

suggested important distinctions between ecological, interpersonal, extended, private and conceptual aspects of self. Gallagher (2000, pp.14-21) conceptualizes self as minimal self and narrative self. The minimal self is the consciousness of oneself as the most immediate in experience, unextended in time but one does not have to be aware of this to have an experience that still counts as a self experience. The minimal self is such that if all of the unessential features cease to exist, one still has an intuition of a basic, immediate existence that is called self. This means an intrinsic self that exists, the distraction from that self notwithstanding. Here, self enjoys the immediacy of consciousness though the consideration here does not extend to the continuity of personal identity over time as it is restricted to the propinquity of consciousness.

Unlike the minimal self which is limited, the second perspective is the extended or the narrative self and is conceptualized in terms of the sequence of events that relates with the memories of the past and envisages the future. It is the non-minimal self (Dennett, 1986, 1991). It is a scenario in which the present situation is always a presentation of the assessment of the past in such a way that the results of assessment influence the future thus bringing about a change. It is a scenario of interaction between the self and the non-self, in which change is produced. For Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996, p.19, 21.), narratives and self are inseparable as narrative is simultaneously borne out of experience and gives shape to experience. It is in this context that this paper contextualizes the self. A professional journalist, as stated earlier, had agglomerated life narratives that include education, training, interest in the job, and so forth before he became qualified. These narratives are strong enough for him to produce a profile of informed ethics that are strong to enable an acceptable professional practice.

The Imperative of Self as an Ethical Formalism

The continuous quest for universalism in the search for acceptable ethics is an indication of the narrowing of individualism. It reduces the potential of personal ethics as an acceptable intellectual, professional and righteous guide for the practice of journalism. This paper advocates a rethink. While the global search cannot be considered a bad-intentioned or ill-conceived activity, it is necessary to accentuate the fact that the exercise strikes a blow to the confidence in self-oriented morality.

However, it is crucial to appreciate the fact that while any eventual global ethics would be universally determined and formulated, it would be individually operated. Liability to such a universal is individually determined. The integrity of any eventual global ethical system does not reside in the universalized document but in the operational capacity of the individual who practises his or her profession based on that ethical system. The journalist's social responsibility is assessed at personal level and liability for poor performance would normally be personally borne. Therefore, the operation, sustenance and success of any eventually globalized system are determined at the individual level. The self is therefore a crucial element in the success of any ethical universal.

The self, in its dispositional behavior, is an unquantifiable element in the success of any neoliberal society where self and selfish tendencies drive capitalism. It should be understood that private ownership is not the only characteristic of the capitalistic system. Personal initiatives at every level of activity from ownership to operations are the factors that come into play for capitalism to succeed. In spite of the general rules that apply as well as the drive of the government in the functioning of capitalism, individual initiatives determine to a great extent the success that is achieved. For instance, when a pilot flies a jet, he has a robust cache of instructions and several rules to fly but the pilot's personal judgment in keeping with these instructions will eventually determine whether he will fly the aircraft successfully or not. This is a good reason why several aircraft crashes have been attributed to personal errors either on the part of those on the control towers or pilots.

Furthermore, religion has played a very crucial factor in the exposition of self as an ethical standard in Africa. Most religious backgrounds, especially the monotheism of Christianity and Islam, stress the individualistic nature of account-giving when the chips are down. While the two religions preach association or fellowship with fellow believers as a means of faith sustenance, each faithful is individually responsible for his or her actions which shall be decided on the judgment day. The scenario in the African traditional religions is fuzzy. There is no easily decipherable position regarding where one heads after death or who one is accountable to upon demise.

Implications of Self Ethics as Moral Standard

The quest for self ethics brings up some issues. One is the need to examine the contiguity of ethical universals with personal morals of the journalist. If an ethical universal preaches objectivity, how does objectivity apply in a particular coverage that the journalist is handling? While objectivity can fairly be defined as the ability of the journalist to represent every party to a story, fairness is when your reporting is not opposed to justice. Rather than being fair, even-handedness of the journalist will be the self-discretion needed to ensure that the matter does not get out of hand especially in the case of an ethnic war.

For instance, if a side kills 40 persons in a war, to report that the other kills 100 (even though it is factual) will most likely create more problems. Therefore, even-handedness rather than objectivity is the key to restoring peace; given that restoration of peace is part of the social responsibility of the journalist. Such even-handedness is always a hard value to be seen included in any ethical standard because it is an ethical moral that is self-driven.

Another implication is that media ethics are not always subject to statutory adjudication and therefore are at the mercy of self (the journalist) in order to make it work. The eventual global ethics will be mere rules that do not have the statutory weight of the constitution or the force of the law. Besides that, rules do not pass through the baptism of fire that a typical national constitution does. A typical constitution is formulated and deliberated on as a bill at two levels of lower and upper legislation (as in House of Representatives and Senate in the case of the United States and Nigeria) before it is assented to by the head of state. Any global eventual ethics whether at national and global level do not follow these critical steps. What is more, the audience of such a constitution is well defined usually within the remit of a geographical location. This means also that the citizenry to which such a constitution is directed is clearly demarcated and seen. While the individual who flouts the constitution or disobeys the laws of the land is punished if he is caught, the flouter of an ethical system can only be reprimanded and he or she can decide to accept the reprimand or reject it. This implies that media ethical standards depend heavily on the propriety and decency of the journalist to make them work. These acts of propriety and decency reside in the domain of personal morality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The narratives of education, training, passion and discretion that the journalist has for the job constitute one of the factors that enhance the self that operates in the journalist. These narratives and knowledge about the ethical and legal issues that affect and influence journalism practice should prepare him for the job. This preparation should include the ability to differentiate between what is right and what is not right. Owing to the fact that personal discretion is a crucial factor, the following points are recommended as part of the buildup to the formalization of personal morals as a guide for journalism practice:

- Formal recognition by media stakeholders that the individual journalist's discretion is an important factor in determining the integrity of any ethical system and accordance of recognition to the development of personal ethics into a standard.
- Rather than force organizational and ethical universals on a journalist, exercise of ethical discretion should be formalized as part of the way he or she can practise the profession in a media organization.
- Journalism education and training should henceforth not restrict ethics training to ethical universals but also the development of personal morals as they relate to journalism practice.
- Media houses should float internal training and workshops on self ethics and how it can be used to improve on the performance of the organization.
- Areas of friction among universal, organizational and self ethics should be identified in stakeholder dialogues with a view to resolving them.

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