



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Ethical issues in internet-based journalism practice in Nigeria

Ugo Solomon Ugo *, Anruchi Peter-Wagbara and Okoro Jude Omaka

Department of Mass Communication, University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2023, 19(01), 1072–1081

Publication history: Received on 08 June 2023; revised on 20 July 2023; accepted on 22 July 2023

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2023.19.1.1442>

Abstract

The guiding and central narrative of ethical issues in Nigeria is the alarming spread of fake news, hate speech, source credibility, quackery, poor internal censorship and other unwholesome practices resulting to serious ethical issues among internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria. The world has been engulfed in a spectre of fake news and disinformation with less attention to ethically sound reporting that has been the most potent tool for objective journalism across the world. People are more concerned with hot news reporting against balanced reporting where all sides are displayed and this has shown less integrity on media practice. Therefore, this study examines ethical issues in internet based journalism practice in Nigeria against a sprawling fake news syndrome among internet based platforms with a view to examining factors that trigger ethical concerns among internet based journalism practitioners. The study was anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory with focused group discussion guide and key informant interview as instruments for data collection. Systematic sampling technique was used in selecting 5,944 registered journalists in Nigeria, media scholars and Nigerian Union of Journalists' ethics committee drawn from the six geo-political zones, data from discussants were analysed using detailed, orient probes and discussions. Among other findings, the study revealed that there is a dearth in comprehensive knowledge of media laws because most practitioners are not aware of the legal ramifications of certain media practice which must be adhered to in performing key role conceptions of the media, source credibility occasioned by a clearly defined editorial policy would be very useful in addressing ethical issues of fake news and hate speech prevalent among practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria and adherence to ethical concerns is being hampered by untrained practitioners parading themselves as media influencers on different internet based journalism platforms. The study recommended that to curb the rising trend of ethical issues among internet based journalism practitioners in Nigeria, there should be a deliberate effort to increase the level of awareness and adherence to media laws in order to create online news platforms devoid of legal issues, strong regulatory framework by government and the Nigerian Union of Journalists to ensure that internet based journalism platforms instill editorial philosophy and constant training and retraining of practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in order to raise the bar against flagrant disregard for ethical principles of journalism.

Keywords: Hate Speech; Internet Based Journalism Platforms; Ethical Issues; Internal Censorship; Fake News

1. Introduction

The guiding and central narrative of ethical issues in an internet based journalism era in Nigeria is the alarming spread of fake news, hate speech, source credibility, quackery, poor internal censorship and other unwholesome practices resulting to serious ethical issues. As it is assumed, internet based journalism which is thriving in the 21st century digital environment is given the task of curbing excesses of those holding public offices in trust for the people through advocacy, information that enhance balance of power and heightened awareness through a two-way flow of information.

In effect, the guarantee of the notion above is being propelled by interactivity which is one of the value added characteristics of internet based journalism. As a recent genre in journalism, interactivity affords internet based

*Corresponding author: Ugo Solomon Ugo

journalism platforms to have a powerful sense of user engagement with media texts, images, video or audio files in an interactive way. In this context, being interactive signifies that internet based journalism audience have ability to directly intervene in message content and change the images and texts that they access. Thus, internet based journalism provides an opportunity for a two-way communication and feedback process through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and enhances network connectivity which enables the audience to be more active to media messages.

However, a restraining factor to the numerous advantages of internet based journalism is the increasing proliferation of internet based platforms operated by quacks with little or no training in journalism. Internet based journalism platforms often set up by high profile politicians, entertainment gurus and business executives are skewed to rip the public of the core essence of journalism with serious ethical flaws. Idowu (2018,p.98) emphasized that the media parades all sort of players from the trained to the untrained; from the purpose driven journalists to the gatecrashers, the ethical and whimsical. Describing internet based journalism as scavengers of ethical processes, he also highlighted that internet based journalism practitioners discuss all manner of issues; the puerile, salacious, ennobling and useful, the enervating and elevating. Their coverage ranges from politics, economy, religion, sports, real estate, music, fashion, lifestyle, horticulture and other aspects of coverage.

Undoubtedly, Ogbondah (2003, p.143) maintained that the responsibility to disseminate information which shall be exercised without undue hindrance. In that process, those responsibilities are expected to be forthright and to have the nation's interest as the primary consideration. To this end, the strings of the interactions in an internet based journalism era are normally controlled by many variables. Therefore, this paper explores the extent to which the variables give rise to ethical concerns in internet based journalism practice in Nigeria.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Ethical concerns have been the greatest albatross to internet based journalism practice in Nigeria. Since attaining widespread usage and acceptance two decades ago in the country, internet based journalism platforms have often acted contrary to ethical restrictions in the guise of the much avowed press freedom to spread fake news, hate speech, dearth of source credibility, quackery, poor internal censorship and other unwholesome practices resulting to serious ethical issues. Even though some media laws restrict the traditional journalist's right to secure information that may be detrimental to the sovereignty of the nation and the rights and privileges of the citizenry. Internet based journalism practitioners accentuate the act of seeking vital information about business executives, influential private individuals and government activities which are tagged official secrets or criticism of the government policies and programmes in order to blackmail government officials for personal benefits as against the interest of the public.

In this light, Karikari (2018,p.373) opined that internet based journalism as content formats emerging with the opening of the media space has been embroiled in ethical concerns in different degrees. It ranges from public complaints about impropriety of internet based journalism platforms have become increasingly widespread. Much of ethical concerns arise from incessant invective, blackmail, incendiary content, obscene scenes, intemperate and insulting manner of speech characterizing internet based journalism content and discussions arising from these contents. Kalikari also expressed that some internet based journalism platforms often times attract public opprobrium and unenviable appellation as a rented press which has no ideology, editorial philosophy nor editorial independence because some of these platforms are always at the service of anyone who can hire it.

Ostensibly, internet based journalism platforms like; *Sahara Reporters*, *Premium Times*, *Naijagists.com*, *Crossriverwatch.com*, *Ripples Nigeria*, *Periscope News Nigeria*, *Information Nigeria*, *Aproko247 News*, *The People's Gazette* and a plethora of others have devised discreetly innovative and effective strategy of dominating and controlling of public voices on several issues with the intention of drowning out objective voices within the social, cultural and political milieu in Nigeria. This is enamoured by prevalent partisanship that dominate their area of coverage or where their contents are fancied. One therefore wonders why the proliferation of internet based journalism with no clear vision nor ethical consideration! One may also ask, why has the Nigerian Press Council, agitators of media rights agenda and other government agencies failed to develop an effective framework as a cardinal rule that would instill responsible and ethical policies in the operations of internet based journalism platforms in the country to simmer down prevalence of ethical concerns in their practice? Thus, these problems and the attempt to answer these questions therefore necessitate this enquiry.

1.2. Objectives of the study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the prevalence of ethical issues in internet based journalism practice in Nigeria. Specifically, this paper sought to:

- Ascertain the level of awareness of media laws among practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria.
- Establish whether internet based journalism platforms have editorial philosophy and editorial independence guiding their practice in Nigeria.
- Find out the perceived adherence to media laws and ethical concerns among internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria.
- Ascertain if there are pointers indicating that some internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria portray their activities as rented press which has no ideology

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

- What is the level of awareness of media laws among practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria?
- How do editorial philosophy and editorial independence influence internet based journalism practice in Nigeria?
- How does the perceived adherence to media laws influence ethical concerns among internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria.
- What are the pointers that some internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria portray their activities as rented press which has no ideology?

1.4. Significance of the study

This research will help practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria to identify media laws and to know their rights and limits within the law and also restrain and assert themselves within these limits and rights respectively.

It will also be beneficial to students in institutions of higher learning offering Mass Communication and related courses who may wish to undertake a study in this area or practice internet based journalism upon graduation.

This study will contribute to the existing literature in the area of ethical concerns among practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria. Finally, it will further provide information that will help to review internet based journalism practice in Nigeria.

2. Review of Extant Literature

2.1. Catalysts of Internet based Journalism

Nigerian media landscape has changed dramatically over the years with online based news outlets competing for audiences with the traditional media organisations. This is fuelled by Internet based platforms, largely being engineered by new media technologies resulting to the creation of many internet based platforms such as Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, Tiktok, LinkedIn and other digital platforms that facilitate news production, dissemination and consumption across the world. Ahmedu & Busari (2020,p.73) attributed internet based platforms to social media which was developed through the web 2.0 coined to describe the new wave of internet modernization that enables users to publish and share contents online. The emergence of internet based platforms through advancement in communication technology, the news ecology has metamorphosed into another sphere. With the help of smartphones, internet based platforms have revolutionised how people generate and consume news (Udenze&Oshionebo 2020,p.115).

Also, internet based platforms have utilised the advantage of user generated content because this feature allows users themselves to develop the content on the social media platforms. For instance, practitioners of internet based platforms can post any update on Facebook, upload video in YouTube and also create personal blogs. Therefore, it allows more participation and freedom of expression for the users in comparison to the conventional mass media such as television, radio, newspaper, etc. It is because; in social media your content is not filtered by any gatekeepers unlike the other forms of media.

Similarly, Schafer (2015,p.3) asserted that many scholars have interpreted the advent of online media as a second structural transformation of the public sphere. With the rise of individual websites and search engines in the early 1990s, the increasing availability of information online, and with growing online audiences, scholars argued that these

new media have the potential to fundamentally change societal communication and revive the public sphere. The advent of internet based journalism platforms has also encouraged ordinary citizens to produce and disseminating journalistic materials like (news, features, analyses, comments, photographs, cartoon etc.) Citizen's eyewitness accounts of events are now being relied on by many audiences as sources of news.

According to Yalaju (2001, p.185), the media is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitation, but also a collective organizer. In this respect, it can be compared with scaffolding put around a building under construction, it indicates the shape the building will have and make communication between the various building works easier, helps the workers to distribute the work and to be aware of the general results jointly achieved by the organized works. Within this context, internet based technology play vital role in establishing a good communication channel between the citizens and the government. For instance, nowadays citizens of a democratic country like Nigeria can have access to the information regarding any government policy as the information is digitalised and made easily accessible for the citizens.

2.2. Internet Based Journalism as Commercial Journalism in An Era of Information Society

New technology has enabled large number of participations in public discussions because a change in technology usage has shaped the communication process in which we have formed a personal relation to the new media than what we had with the old media. The concept of virtual identity has become a popular idea for many researchers in order to understand the impact of new media in developing one's own identity. (Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University, India). Accordingly, Ekwok, Ugo and Eja (2022), technological innovations and a climate of social media applications have encouraged multimedia communication, which incorporates video, audio, still photographs, chats, messages and graphics. With the aid of web links on different social media platforms, Nigerians with her multicultural political difference can access information in different forms.

Interestingly, information society is the increasing influence of information in our daily life and also commercialisation of information in an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) driven global market. Information society emerged because of the advancement of information and communication technologies. In other words, information society can be considered to be the application of computers, information technology and telecommunication which facilitates communication in a much faster pace across the world. Essentially, these are key elements that propel internet based journalism which has raised ethical concerns. Idowu, (2018) posited that everything cannot be abandoned to the whims of commercial journalism as there remain legitimate public concerns and developmental issues that commercial journalism cannot adequately serve the core essence of the media as watchdog of the society.

Even though the advent of information age has brought about changes in the socio-economic lives of people in terms of information, dissemination and content creation; it has brought new form of digitalised products and services as well as new regulations on the information flow. Internet based platforms are digital technologies that allow people to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media among themselves. Even with myriads of advantages, digital media practitioners find it difficult to address ethical dilemmas associated with internet based platforms because of competition and quest for higher traffic on their platforms.

2.3. Media Laws, Tenets and Ethical Dilemmas among Internet Based Journalism Platforms

It is important to point out that some authors use media law, mass communication and press law interchangeably. This is because the mass communication domain has been stretched in recent times to include all forms of information and communicative processes and channels. The original mass communication domain consisted of the press (newspaper and magazine), radio, television, film, public relations and advertising. But in recent times new forms and even old ones that were not in the original list have been included. Some of these new forms are; drama, phonographs, the internet which houses internet based journalism platforms, some authors have defined media laws to mean all the laws made to govern the activities of these wide varieties of media. For example, Malami (1999, P. 5) emphasized that; "media or press law, is the law governing the receiving and dissemination of ideas and information, the media of mass communication, the role of press and the writing public, their rights and their duties to the private individual and the state in general".

In the field of journalism which should ideally guide internet based journalism practitioners, media laws and ethics help journalists to determine what is right to be published on their platforms. The internet based journalist according to Rothstein 1979 as cited in (Udeze, 2005, p.131) can use the platform to degrade, defame, shatter privacy, invade intimacy, stress the vulgar, the cheap and the grotesque. The internet based journalism practitioners have in most cases been confronted by ethical dilemmas. As a branch of philosophy, ethics makes it possible for media practitioners to

subject their conduct to test in line with laid down procedures of the profession. It is instructive to note that media ethics are made by regulatory or journalism bodies but individually enforced.

Therefore, the following ethical issues have always confounded the advantages of internet based journalism practice in Nigeria.

2.4. Fake News Conundrum

Fake news as described by Ogbette, Idam, Kareem & Ogbette (2019, p. 96) is a neologism often used to refer to fabricated news. This type of news found mostly among internet based journalism platforms have no basis, but is presented as being factually accurate. It ranges from, satire, false connection, misleading content, false context; genuine content shared with false contextual information, imposter content, manipulated content and fabricated content. Over the years, Internet based journalism platforms have continued to aid and abate the popularization of fake news as a conundrum in the digital public sphere. It encourages false or misleading information presented as news which may damage the reputation of a person or entity.

The underlying fact as highlighted by Abiodun & Kayode (2018, p. 403), the spread of fake news is very cheap on the internet. "The invention of the internet has over the years given a new dimension to the operation of the media. The internet provides some form of unparalleled avenue to the generality of the people trained and untrained, to disseminate information quickly and cheaply across the world". Ethical concerns like spread of fake news phenomenon on the internet by internet based journalism platforms is caused by the connected nature and the preference for speed over accuracy because internet content providers and distributors are constantly in a battle for attention and advertising revenue, they constantly flout ethical concerns to boost traffic. Unlike print publications that usually have reporters all over to authenticate facts before reporting a breaking story, internet based journalists are necessitated by the franticness of the world in which they find themselves (Ogbette, Idam, Kareem & Ogbette, 2019).

Examining fake news as one of the biggest challenge internet based platforms, Goode 2005 (as cited in Oso & Akanni, 2018) underscored that the persuasive role of computer mediated communication in contemporary social, political and cultural is however rarely in dispute. This argument was strengthened by the notion that media institutions and technologies such as internet based platforms shouldered the burden of extreme hopes, expectations and fears throughout the twentieth century and this shows little signs of abating in the digitized twenty-first century.

In 2020, the spread of fake news on internet based journalism platforms like; *Sahara reporters*, *Premium Times*, *NaijaGist.com*, *Pulse Nigeria* among others created fear and anxiety in the lives of people across the country because many Nigerians who were confined in solitude depended on information gotten from internet based platforms. Fear and wrong information resulted to the death of many innocent citizens who could not be rendered the help needed as a result of covid-19 fear. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened by fake news on different internet based journalism platforms caused massive disruptions in the normal life of the people, especially with several mitigating protocols rolled out to help curb its effects. As restrictions and containment protocols abound, the spread of fake news became a thorny issue that caused more deaths as a result of fear instilled on Nigerians by purveyors of fake news.

2.5. Blackmail and Cyber bullying

Blackmail and crimes against adult, teenagers, children using internet based platforms have in recent times exposed people to harassment and inappropriate communication with others. Increasing level of fake identity and fraud as a result of content from these internet platforms can be made available to anyone who is smart enough. Most thieves only need a small amount of information to turn your life into a nightmare by forging your identity with the intent of blackmail. Information technology revolution associated with the use of internet based platform has brought about two edge functions:

On one hand, it has contributed positive values to the world. While on the other hand, it has produced so many maladies that threaten societal order and also producing a new wave of crime to the world. Internet based platforms which ordinarily should be a blessing as it exposes one to a lot of opportunities in various fields of life is fast becoming a source of discomfort and worry due to the blackmail being perpetrated through the platform.

2.6. Ethical Dilemma of Hate Speech

Emergence of hate speech as a serious ethical concern became rift because of raging proliferation of online or internet based journalism platforms which enhanced computer mediated communication that opened up discourse on several

issues irrespective of location. Hate speech are words that are insulting to those in power ,minority groups, ethnic stalk or demeaning of individuals who are particularly visible in the society.

At critical times such as during election campaigns like the 2023 general elections, hate speech was used to manipulate prospective voters; accusations of promoting hate speech may be traded among political opponents or used by those in power to curb dissent and criticism. Nemes (2002 p.193) considered the internet a very important channel for those who want to spread messages of hatred or incendiary remarks. In Nigeria today, practitioners of internet deliberately showcallousness in discharging their roles as information platforms , rather they serve as the machinery for promoting disunity, igniting crises and triggering hatred among the members of the society (Ali 2013: 1).

Practitioners of internet based journalism platforms ought to have certain moral principles to be followed which could be termed as 'professional ethics'. Ethics may not be forced on any one but each profession carries a 'Code of Conduct' to be seen as rules of practice. Ethical guidelines are peculiar to each profession and are designed to prevent abuse and unrestrained use of the powers and privileges of that profession. Many Newspapers in Nigeria have formulated their own code of ethics for their employees to follow.

However, hate speech is still prevalent among internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria. It is still being used by internet based journalism platforms to promote violence against other people based on racial segregation, ethnicity bias, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or diseases. Although several governments and social media sites are trying to curb the hate speech, it is still plaguing our society especially at the ongoing presidential elections petitions tribunal in Nigeria. All of these are manifesting on Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram and others are social media that promote free speech. It allows users to post contents that may be hateful without any fear of repercussion, leading to suspension orders for violating its terms of service, namely, abusive or hateful behaviour (Fiberesima, Abomaye,Williams& George, 2022).

2.7. Ethical Issues of Source Credibility, Quackery and Brown Envelope Journalism

Ethical issues of source credibility, quackery and brown envelope syndrome have strayed consciously into internet based platforms in the guise of "social media influencers".It is an outright disregard to the canons of professional journalism as long as these quacks have a platform to engage, share messages and receive feedback. These set of practitioners are not interested in facts or details, their sole aim is to generate constant traffic in order to top online charts.

Source credibility and attribution of sources is sacrificed in order to gain acceptance. Internet based journalism practice has popularised brown envelope journalism which is now a euphemism for bribe. (Idowu 2018,p.97) asserts that it refers to the purchasing of favourable mention in the media in the short term or cultivating favourable relationship in the long term through cash and material gifts. In situations like this, internet based journalism practitioners tend to water down principles of balance, objectivity and accuracy in order to sustain patronage.

At the heart of ethical issues is deceptive content packaging. Internet based journalism platformsform themselves into cartels in most cases shortchange their audience with unduly sensationalized or screaming headlines which often times do not tally with the body of the story. (Idowu 2018) explained that quacks make depraved attempt to hoodwink audiences into patronizing media products that are otherwise undeserving and use of undue adjectives to qualify as news subject to whom trained journalists have less association with is supported by pecuniary gifts. In effect, ethical issues of source credibility, quackery and brown envelope syndrome contribute to the thorny issues inherent in the practice of internet based journalism in Nigeria.

2.8. Theoretical Framework

The contributions of communication theories in strengthening research of this nature can never be over-emphasized. The theoretical framework is embedded in the Social Responsibility theory which was propounded by F.Siebret, T. Peterson and Schwann in 1968.Anaeto, Onabanjo&Osifeso (2008), the major principle of the theory is that freedom of the press including internet based p journalism platforms must be done responsibly in line with global best practices. It also notes that every media including internet based platforms which enjoys a principal position in the society is expected to be responsible to the society in carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication that informs, educate, mobilise, advocate, entertain and put facts in perspective.

Uzuegbunam (2013) regarded social responsibility theory as a western theory that incorporates part of the libertarian principle and introduces some new elements into media practice. The underlying principle of the social responsibility theory of the press is that the press should be free to perform the functions which the libertarian theory granted it

freedom to perform, but that this freedom should be exercised with responsibility. If the media which also include internet based journalism platforms fail to meet their responsibilities to society, the social responsibility theory holds that the government should encourage the media to comply by way of controlling them. (Dominick 2009 as cited in Uzuegbunam 2013) wrote that:

“This approach holds that the press has a right to criticize government and other institutions, but it also has a responsibility to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to society’s needs and interests. The press does not have the freedom to do as it pleases; it is obligated to respond to society’s requirements...

Since the media profession already have professional codes guiding them, it is very imperative for regulators of traditional media journalism to streamline the activities of the practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in order to conform to the basic journalistic codes such that issues of ethical concerns prevalent with these platforms are contained through stringent measures.

3. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research method because it is a methodology that does not employ mathematical or statistical summation. Qualitative research method allows the researcher the flexibility of probing deeper into his/her data set. As result of virtual characteristics of the study, the researcher adopted online interviewing method. Interview questions were sent to research participants through zoom meetings with 165 journalists systematically selected from a pool of 5,944 registered journalists in Nigeria. This reflected reasonable spread across the six geo-political zones in the country. Journalists based in states like; Lagos in the South-West, Cross River in the South-South, Abuja in the North Central, Kaduna in the North West and Taraba in the North East were selected. Media scholars drawn across universities in the country were also selected and online consumers and the participants were given time to reply.

Besides, the researcher was a non participant observer who worked with research assistants during the recorded zoom meetings and this gave the researcher a first hand observation of what transpired in the group. Overall, the study methodology constitutes qualitative methods of online interviews and non- participant observation and data methods of themes, narratives, analysis and interpretation.

Table 1 Number and Features of Research Participants across six Nigerian States

Respondents	C’River	Lagos	Enugu	Kaduna	Taraba	FCT	Total
Journalists	16	20	16	16	16	16	100
Communication Scholars	7	10	7	7	7	7	45
NUJ Ethics Committee	3	5	3	3	3	3	20
Total	26	35	26	26	26	26	165

Participants were clearly told that zoom sessions were being recorded and the potential benefits of their objective inputs were explained to participants so as to gain their cooperation and establish an interpersonal relationship between the researcher and participants

4. Results and Discussion of Findings

After data were collected through online interview and none participant observation, four themes which aligned with the objectives of the study emerged. These include; awareness of media laws, editorial policy and editorial independence, adherence to media laws and ethical concerns and portrayal as rented press. These themes are discussed below.

4.1. Awareness of Media Laws

Internet based journalism platform have become useful tools for gathering and dissemination of news on Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and other social media handles. Investigation reveals that the level of awareness of media laws among practitioners of internet based journalism platform in Nigeria is quite low owing to the fact that most

practitioners that own the platforms are not trained journalists. Some are just in it for profit making because the virtual ecology of news reporting gives them leverage to harness different platforms in the twenty-first century.

As stated earlier, it corroborates the views of (Idowu 2018), “that quacks make depraved attempt to hoodwink audiences into patronizing media products that are otherwise undeserving and use of undue adjectives to qualify as news subject to which trained journalists have less association with is supported by pecuniary gifts”. The ease of multimedia functionality alone can not guarantee awareness of media laws, respondents opined that operators of internet based platforms should be subjected to some level of training on media laws to brace issues of litigations associated with internet based platforms. From the foregoing, dearth in comprehensive knowledge of media laws implies that most practitioners are not aware of the legal ramification of media laws which must be adhered to in performing key role conceptions of the media

4.2. Editorial Philosophy and Independence

According to respondents drawn from newspaper journalists, broadcast media journalists, communication scholars and NUJ ethics committee. Editorial philosophy and independence has a way of influencing internet based journalism practice in Nigeria if properly adhered to by the practitioners. Accordingly, they asserted that if this is done, it would help reduce duplication of the same information in various online platforms and bring about source credibility in these platforms. Unanimously, discussants affirmed that source credibility occasioned by a clearly defined editorial policy would be very useful in addressing ethical issues of fake news and hate speech prevalent among practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria. According to discussants, it would strengthen extant obligations of journalists across different media platforms to ensure balanced, objective, fair and accurate reportage in order to stem the tide of source credibility. Those interviewed also revealed that there is a great impact of digital media on the news ecology but it must be done within the ambit of sound editorial policy.

4.3. Adherence to Media Laws

The research question sought to know the level at which perceived adherence to media laws is likely to alter the level of ethical concerns. Just like an experienced defender who is scared of making clumsy tackles to avoid conceding a penalty. Respondents indicated that as long as many quacks own several internet based journalism platforms in Nigeria, solving ethical issues remains a huge mirage. Therefore, it portrays that adherence to ethical concerns is being hampered by untrained practitioners parading themselves as media influencers on different internet based journalism platforms. They opined the concerted efforts in collaboration with regulatory agencies should be directed towards dealing with “erring” practitioners who flout ethical codes. According to discussants, adherence to media laws will help create an online platform devoid of legal issues in the form of law suits emanating from inability to adhere to the laid down media laws.

4.4. Ethical Concerns and Portrayal as Rented Press

Respondents revealed that one major area of concern in modern day press coverage in Nigeria is that in spite of clearly defined ethical codes in the media, several internet based journalism platforms have shown clear disregard for media ethics in the discharge of their responsibilities. Thus, the appellation as rented press places these platforms as cash and carry media outlets. Findings indicate that internet based journalism platforms are often caught in the web that does not allow them to effectively perform their traditional watchdog role as a result of skewed reportage aimed at profit making corroborates Idowu (2018) description of payola journalists. Most of these internet based platforms operate without laid down journalism ethics and laws as most of them are operated by non professionals who are not even interested in learning the ethical principles of the profession.

5. Conclusion

Arising from the findings which revealed that awareness of media laws among practitioners of internet based journalism platform in Nigeria is quite low owing to the fact that most practitioners who own these platforms are not trained journalists. It can be concluded that many internet based practitioners are only interested in making profits rather than ensuring ethical standard. It is also adduced that editorial philosophy and independence has a way of influencing internet based journalism practice in Nigeria if properly adhered to by the practitioners. If this is done, it will help reduce duplication of the same information in various online platforms and bring about credibility in these platforms. Similarly, adherence to media laws will help create online journalism platforms that are devoid of legal issues in the form of law suits emanating from inability to adhere to the laid down media laws. In spite of clearly defined ethical codes in the media, several internet based journalism platforms have shown clear disregard for media ethics in the discharge of their responsibilities

5.1. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher therefore recommends that;

- There should be a deliberate effort to increase level of awareness and adherence to media laws in order to create online news platforms devoid of legal issues in the form of law suits emanating from inability to adhere to ethical principles.
- There should be a strong regulatory framework by government and the Nigerian Union of Journalists to ensure that internet based journalism platforms instill editorial philosophy and independence to influence their news treatment in line with ethical codes.
- There should be constant training and retraining of practitioners of internet based journalism platforms in order to raise the bar against flagrant disregard for ethical principles of journalism.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to disclosed.

References

- [1] Anaeto, S. G., Onabanjo, O. S. & Osifeso, J. B. (2008). *Models and Theories of Mass Communication*. Maryland: African Renaissance Books Incorporated.
- [2] Abiodun, S. & Kayode, E. (2018). Watchdog or Captured Media? A Study of the role of the media in Nigeria's Emerging Democracy, 1999-2016, 387-421.
- [3] Ali, A. (2013). Media Role and the Hurdle of a Nigerian Journalist 1984-1999. *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review*, vol.2, No. 9, pp.1-13
- [4] Amedu, A. A. & Busari, W. B. (2020) Influence of Online Advertising on Audience Patronage of Nollywood Movies in Ibadan.
- [5] Ekwok, L. Ugo S. & Eja, B. (2022) Social Media Communication and The Psychological Challenges of Isolated Covid-19 Patients Pandemic in Nigeria. *Mkar Journal of Culture & Media Studies* Vol 7. No 1
- [6] Fiberesima, P. Abomaye, Williams, A & George, S (2021). Social Media and Hate Speech: Implications for Socio-Political Stability in Rivers State. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*: Vol, 21 No 2
- [7] Nemes, I. (2002). Regulating Hate Speech in Cyberspace: Issues of Desirability and Efficacy. *Information & Communications Technology Law*. Vol. 11, No.3
- [8] New Media Module, Centre for Open and Distance Learning Tezpur University India Accessed at: https://www.tezu.ernet.in>tu_codl.
- [9] Oso, L. & Akanni, T. (2018). Watchdog or Captured Media? A Study of the role of the media in Nigeria's Emerging Democracy, 1999-2016, 159-204.
- [10] Ogbette, A, Idam, M. Kareem, A. & Ogbette, D. (2019) Fake News in Nigeria: Causes, Effects and Management. *Journal of Information and Knowledge Management*. Vol.9, No.2.
- [11] Ogbondah, C. (2003). *State Press Relations in Nigeria (1993-1998): Human Rights and Democratic Development*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited
- [12] Schäfer, M. (2015). Digital Public Sphere. accessed. accessed from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291312249>
- [13] Idowu, L. (2018) Watchdog or Captured Media? A Study of the role of the media in Nigeria's Emerging Democracy, 1999-2016 (93-136)
- [14] Karikari, K. (2018) Watchdog or Captured Media? A Study of the role of the media in Nigeria's Emerging Democracy, 1999-2016 (351-387)
- [15] Udenze, S. & Oshionebo, O. Y. (2020). Social Media and the Changing News Ecology: Whatsapp as the Fifth Estate. *CRUTECH Journal of Communication*. Vol. 2. No. 1, 115-124.

- [16] Udeze E. (2005) Essentials of Photojournalism and Photography. Rhyce Kerex Printers, Enugu
- [17] Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2013). Social Responsibility Theory: A Contemporary Review. A postgraduate Seminar paper presented to the Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Nigeria. Available at https://www.academia.edu/11187397/The_social_responsibility_theory_A_contemporary_review
- [18] Yalaju J.G. (2001) Media Law. Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Prelyn Fortunes Ltd. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999
- [19] Criminal Code of the Federation of Nigeria (2004) section 373 51 and 52