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**Objectivity in Television News Reportage: An
Evaluation of “Occupy Nigeria Movement” (Oil
Subsidy Protest)**

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Abstract

The question of media objectivity in Nigeria has always been in doubt particularly in the area of reportage. It is in this regard that the study on the evaluation of news objectivity in television broadcast was x-rayed to identify the extent to which news objectivity is reliable and credible with a reason to expose the factors that affect news objectivity. To have scholarly perspectives on this issues, books, articles and journals were reviewed in order to have an insight and it was noticed that different scholars had different dimensions to these problems. Therefore, to effectively address these problems, the study analysed the views of two hundred and sixty-six (266) respondents within Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State. Findings from the study indicated that television news reportage can be achieved only if the reporters observe their journalistic ethical guidelines, and are also allowed practice free without interference

from media owners and government. The study suggests that with appropriate measures put in place it will curtail excesses in subjective report where objectivity in news reportage will be achieved.

Background to the Study

Every news organisation has only its credibility and reputation to rely on and it is based on this that a binding relationship is built between the public and the organisation. Various existing codes share common elements including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability, as these apply to the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public.

Objectivity in the collation and presentation of news is the goal of the reporter, and a major principle of Journalism. In spite of the fierce competition among newspapers, news magazines, radio, television, or wire services, in regard to who gets a story first and is fastest in making such news items public property, objectivity in the dissemination of news is acknowledged as a significant hallmark of modern journalistic practice.

Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil producer, but still imports about 70% of its gasoline for sale to its citizens. The price of petrol increased from 65 naira (\$0.40; £0.26) per litre to at least 141 naira in filling stations and from 100 naira to at least 200 naira on the black market, from which many Nigerians buy their fuel. With the majority of Nigerians living on less than \$2 per day, cheap petrol is viewed by many Nigerians as the only tangible benefit they receive from the state, hence the widespread disapproval prompted the Occupy Nigeria Movement. The removal of the subsidy took effect from Sunday, 1 January 2012 as announced by the Executive Secretary of the Petroleum Product Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA.)

As a consequence, Nigeria's main trade unions then announced an indefinite strike and mass demonstrations from Monday, 9 of January 2012 unless the removal of the fuel subsidy was reversed. While there is agreement in some quarters that the subsidy might eventually need

to be removed, protesters believe the time is not right for such a drastic move as the average citizen's income is a pittance (Nigeria's monthly minimum wage was recently increased to 18,000 naira or around \$110) and this is the only benefit the common man gets from the government. The minimum wage has still not been implemented across many states in the country. The supposed flagrant disregard for the people's welfare by removal of the fuel subsidy without putting in place programs to cushion the effect necessitated the Occupy Nigeria protests.

Sequel to these events was a media explosion of reportage on the Occupy Nigeria protests as things took a violent dimension across the country. Various media coverage was objective and some were not. The question of who owns and controls what media in what place and at what time therefore determines to a large extent, the degree of objectivity of news reporting in Nigeria and this is reflective in the overall coverage of the Occupy Nigeria Movement.

Objectivity has been the most debatable issue in the history of journalism and there are, therefore, many different ways of looking at it. Media academics such as Gans (1979) and Tuchman (2000) refer to objectivity as an examination of contents of collected news materials. Glasser (1992) points out that objectivity is a balance of beliefs restructured by a journalist and presented against independent thinking. It is difficult to test the objectivity of journalists because it is the credibility of facts gathered by a journalist that lies at the heart of objectivity. In Glasser's opinion, the “notion” of objectivity is flawed against the newsman's mandate of reporting responsibly. Objectivity is therefore professional principle through which journalists write news responsibly and present it to their audience as a final product (Glasser, 1992).

This study intends to discuss objectivity also in reference to the problems that journalists face when they covered the Occupy Nigeria Movement protest. It may be that journalists have problems searching for stories not because they do not embrace journalistic principles of fairness, clarity and objectivity, but because of the way in which facts

are presented to them by news sources (Fred and Wellman, 2003). There have been some cases whereby media audiences have wrongly been made to think that journalists are biased in their coverage. It is against such background that this study will investigate the factors that affect objectivity in the mass media. It is vitally important to bear in mind that bias should not be confused with editorial decisions that express the opinion of the media organization or editors for that matter. The question of objectivity goes back to the gatekeepers, whereby the editors as gatekeepers decide what goes on air or gets published, and what news stories reporters should gather. So the editor decides which story should be run by their respective news organization, can deal with the question of objectivity in the news.

According to Fred and Wellman (2003), editors and media owners are the decision makers in the field of journalism. Journalists, like other professionals, are committed to objectivity. The fact that their journalistic work makes them not only answerable to the audiences, but accountable to their bosses for economic loss they cause because of levity, causes them to tend to be more careful with news handling. The work challenges which range from the deadlines to demands of disclosure of sources of news refuted are big issues that require journalists to embrace objectivity (Tuchman 2000; Ryan 2001).

Thus the ideology of objectivity in journalism is designed to set a standard for journalists to have a sense of direction. The notion of objectivity should reinforce cultural standards and public opinion for which journalists are educators. Objectivity makes journalists free, and independent observers whose duty is to search for truth in a way that reinforce moral and social responsibility (Ryan 2001). It is acknowledged that journalism critics argue that journalists are not objective enough in their profession. In fact, the ideology of news objectivity has been attacked for decades. Some critics argue that it is unrealizable and that it is undesirable. But, it is also good to know that journalists are people who are concerned about the wellbeing of society and their fight for objectivity should be accepted. News and the Critique of Objectivity

A critical dimension provided by Edgar (1992) argued that from a hermeneutic perspective objectivity, in the sense of ‘correspondence to the object’ is inapplicable as a criterion by which reports may be judged. A report must select from the range of possible (and acceptable) interpretations that a social event yields. One author who has reviewed literature that is critical of objectivity within the sociology of news production is Michael Schudson. Schudson (2000) discusses the three dominant perspectives in the area: Firstly, the political economy “that relates the outcome of the news process to the structure of the state and the economy and the economic foundation of the news organization”, secondly, the social organization perspective “which tries to understand how journalists’ efforts on the job are constrained by organizational and occupational demands” and thirdly, the cultural approach “which emphasizes the constraining force of broad cultural traditions and symbolic systems, regardless of the structure of economic organization of the character of occupational routines”. These perspectives all raise doubt that objectivity is attainable.

Both Tuchman (2000) and Gans (1979) attempted to empirically test the idea of objectivity. Tuchman’s findings showed that the newsmen use the label news analysis to place a barrier to problematic stories that the managing editor cannot easily verify. In order to run a story a news reporter has compiled, the editor needs to call a number of sources to know the credibility of the story. This process, according to Tuchman is the most problematic formal aspect of objectivity for the newsmen.

A number of journalism academics who have studied notions of objectivity feel that there is a need to have criteria with which objectivity can be described and be acceptable to all who practice journalism (Donsbach & Klett 2000). According to Glasser (1992), objectivity in journalism is a set of beliefs that commits a journalist to scrutinizing the facts to find the truth about a certain events, which an editor classifies to be newsworthy. Glasser argues that an ideology can

be a moral code that promotes journalistic practices, which assumes a watchdog role of the media in support of certain circumstances.

According to Glasser (1992), objectivity in journalism helps journalists understand three principal developments, each of which contributes to bias in news, namely: (a). Objective reporting is biased against what the press typically defines as its role in a democracy. (b). Adversary press: By this Glasser meant that objectivity in journalism is biased in favour of the status quo. (c). Stereotype opinion and the press. Glasser observes further that journalistic objectivity is an ideology that is committed to the supremacy of the retrievable facts. According to Glasser's explanation, ideology has been interpreted as a set of beliefs, which allow for journalist's claims for objectivity. Glasser describes the idea as being biased against the watchdog functions of the press in favour of the news events being reported. Glasser further elaborates that the second bias of his ideology of journalistic objectivity is bias against free thinking that requires journalists to keep their points of view out of their stories. In Glasser's third bias, the notion of objectivity is described as being biased against the journalists' social responsibility.

In some studies, journalism scholars such as Tuchman (2000), Gans (1979) and Glasser (1992) found it hard to empirically test news objectivity. The reason here had been that there was no formula with which these researchers could measure news objectivity as the ideology turned out to be too philosophical in many ways. This journalistic principle involves interpretation, evaluation and most importantly, judgment. The concept of objectivity has two norms through which it can be tested: (a) through the norm of factuality which requires that a journalist look at the truthfulness of information collected and its relevancy; (b) through the norm of impartiality which requires a reporter to detach and disengage himself or herself from the event he/she is covering (Tuchman 2000). This is unlike Ward's pragmatic news objectivity (1999:7), which argues that interpretation and the writers' opinion should be part of news reporting as long as they are justified on the basis of facts.

Objective reporting involves a complex judgment and an interpretation that weighs all forms of journalistic standards. Objective judgment is a judgment about all reasonableness of a belief, theory or news report. An interpretation is objective if it is justified according to the available standards. In other words, it will require the researcher to look at newsworthiness, news relevancy and factuality, which can only be evaluated by news editors

News and the Critique of Objectivity

Objectivity is not only a much discussed and misunderstood concept, it is also widely criticized. Herman and Chomsky (1994), in their propaganda model argue that ‘the raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print’. They argue that these filters fix the premises of discourse and interpretations and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place. These set of news “filters” include owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant media firms; advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and “experts” and “flak” as a means of disciplining the media. Under these constraints, it can be argued that seeking objectivity would be an ideological illusion. In their words:

The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able convince themselves that they choose to interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional news values. Within limits of the filter constraints they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable (Herman and Chomsky, 1994).

The above views seem to be supported by Baker (2002) who argues that ‘the rush to adopt “objectivity” as newspapers’ ruling journalistic norm was a tool used to promote the advertiser-rewarded, mass-appeal

newspapers. This is because the ‘ purportedly objective style offends few people and leaves more people reasonably, even if less intensely, satisfied than would, for example, a partisan style. Baker goes further to argue that as a ruling norm, objectivity tend toward reduced product differentiation and leads to monopoly papers. In his opinion, the increasing rule of objectivity as the journalism’s dominant norm and the increase of monopoly papers correlated throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the steady increase of advertising revenue as a contribution to newspaper revenue.

Objective reporting involves a complex judgment and an interpretation that weighs all forms of journalistic standards. Objective judgment is a judgment about all reasonableness of a belief, theory or news report. An interpretation is objective if it is justified according to the available standards. In other words, it will require the researcher to look at newsworthiness, news relevancy and factuality, which can only be evaluated by news editors. Journalism requires one to adopt different notions of neutrality for different types of stories. For example, for straight forwards news information, two forms of neutrality are desirable: 1) cautious neutrality means the reporter does not take side, and avoids contentious issues. Journalists must be careful in handling news information to avoid controversies. Caution is appropriate where there is no credible news source; 2) liberal neutrality gives the journalist a chance to make explicit and evaluations and judgments as long as they are based on facts (Ward 1999).

News Distortion

Social scientists and other journalism critics complain that news is often distorted. The distortion in the news is blamed on journalists who cover the news. Frankly speaking, journalists can be answerable to their readers only if the facts made available to them are correct but in their reporting they omit some facts because they want to do a favour to someone involved in the story. There are two circumstances in which news can be distorted. Firstly, when distorted facts are made available to a journalist and the situation is such that the people

involved cannot be reached for comment about the events. Then the newspapermen can go ahead and publish the news article. If someone later claims that what appeared in the newspaper is not factual, and the person makes the facts available to the newspaper, then the newspaper should run the story together with an apology. This is always regarded as an inevitable case of distortion, whereby the newspaper editor cannot help verify the facts. Secondly, when news source intends to give false news factual story is lost. It becomes difficult for the reporter to scrutinize the facts in such an instance. The reporter is compelled to publish insufficient news information.

News distortion, according to Gans (1992), may be valid occurrences in relation to those circumstances that make the source of news information withhold some of the facts. News distortion is often attributed to certain factors, such as journalists’ political and unconscious ideologies. Other issues, like an imbalance of information made available to a journalist, can cause the distortion of news facts which were initially correct. Gans looks at the external reality without considering the internal factors that impact on objectivity. For instance, if the news editor has an interest in a news event, his/her interest will influence the reporter’s news coverage; the editor being the final person in the newsroom who decides which news items should be run in which columns. The editor’s relation with the reporter can therefore affect the reporting of the news. Gans further asserts that asking wrong questions can lead the subject to giving the wrong information. However, I do not think that the way the question is asked can lead to giving the wrong answer by the respondent, if the person understands the question correctly. I believe that there is a kind of distortion of news, which is deemed inevitable, based on circumstances surrounding the news event.

Ward (1999) argued that pragmatic news objectivity is the degree to which interpretation differentiates hard news from soft news. It has been argued that journalistic objectivity shares some core values with scientific objectivity. In addition, journalistic objectivity encompasses philosophical constructs that support its traditional values, namely

accuracy, balance, impartiality and clarity. Accuracy means completeness of information collected. Balance means that there are both facts and opinions, representing only two sides. Impartiality means, among other things, that journalists must be objective in presenting facts and opinions, which includes verifying information, evaluation and judgments of the account of conflicting facts. Ryan argues that journalists are not only answerable to their audience; they are also accountable to their employers who challenge their professionalism. Thus, journalists know that so much is expected of them by their employers as well as the newspaper readers, as far as objectivity is concerned (Ryan 2001).

This study does not aim to defend journalists; neither is it trying to claim that there is absolute objectivity in the media. In a way, one can argue that there is no absolute objectivity in journalism. But when one looks at the circumstances in which journalists find themselves, one will agree that it can be very expensive for a reporter to be objective, especially because objectivity cannot be absolute.

Statement of the Problem

There is no doubt that objectivity is one of the core values of journalism. However, due to the very many problems journalists are faced with in their profession, individual journalists never find it easy to embrace journalism's principles because of the nature of the profession. Thus, the question of objectivity arises. There are basically two situations where a reporter could be subjective when reporting certain events- One, when the information the reporter has collected in his beats is imbalanced and when the account of facts gets distorted in process of transmission from one person to other and secondly, when the facts collected lack clarity because the source of information misinformed the reporter and the editor in this situation can always get the whole thing wrong (Hackett, 1984). In addition to this, ambiguity of facts can influence journalist's objectivity if he cannot find the source for verification.

It is arguable that journalistic principles do not always prevent the distortion of facts, which is the reason why journalists embrace accountability, clarity, and objectivity in their journalistic practice (McQuail, 1994). There are however situations where the news source becomes reluctant to provide the details of news account because of fear of being misquoted in the story. It may happen also that journalists can neither determine the credibility of the source of news information nor the validity of news events due to circumstances surrounding the events. Therefore, the concept of journalistic objectivity may be taken to mean interpretative and analytical objectivity because of the emphasis put on it to discover the truth (Hackett, 1984). This makes one wonder whether objectivity in journalism practice has not been adopted merely to safeguard the future of this profession because ambiguous facts collected could undermine its practice. It is easy to see, for example, how journalism principles can always be affected if the news editor and news reporter deal with an influential news source that dictates what the reporter should write or cover. It is issues and problems like this that the researcher wishes to discuss with the focus being on the factors that influenced the coverage and reportage of the Occupy Nigeria movement.

Research Questions

To effectively address the research problems, five research questions have been raised.

- ❖ Does a political and personal ideological difference affect objective reportage among Journalist?
- ❖ How does the ownership of Media Organisations influence objectivity in news reportage?
- ❖ To what extent does objectivity affect the credibility and prestige of Media Organizations?

- ❖ Based on different reports on Occupy Nigerian Movement by broadcast, do we say media organization adhered to journalistic guidelines?
- ❖ To what extent are Nigerians aware of Occupy Nigeria Movement?
- ❖ How has News reporting on Occupy Nigeria Movement determined Media News objectivity in Nigeria?

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this research is to replicate and extend earlier studies on objective reportage in order to examine whether findings regarding organizations reputation and credibility holds true in public view. The following specific objectives are examined in the study:

- ✚ To draw tentative conclusions on objectivity as a core journalistic value according to which journalists collect and disseminate news to the audience.
- ✚ To identify the limitations faced by media organisations on the account of realities and constraints they are grappled with.
- ✚ To examine the level of objectivity in Media News report on Occupy Nigeria Movement.
- ✚ To evaluate the extent the Media have enlightened Nigerians on Occupy Nigeria Movement.
- ✚ To proffer solutions to a more accurate and objective news reportage

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed the use of survey design as it best suits the nature of the study. This is because a large sample population was chosen to sample different opinion of the population and their

perspective towards the issues of objectivity in television news reportage.

Population of Study

The study sampled, media practitioners, and students of NTA Television College Jos and Television viewers in Rayfield in Plateau state were sampled in the study. This population category cut across both males and females within the age grade of 18 and above in order to achieve balance this done through simple random sampling. Two hundred and sixty-six (300) was the sample size.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Two hundred and sixty six (266) completed questionnaires were analysed and the results presented below:

Table 1: Influence of Journalist’s Personal and Personal Ideology on Report

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
Always	6	2.3
Most times	80	30.1
Sometimes	95	35.7
Not at all	85	31.9

Source: Survey, March, 2014.

From the above table, 2.3% (6) respondents are of the opinion that journalistic report are based on personal ideology while 30.1% (80) believe influences happens most times and 35.7% (95) are of the opinion that personal ideology influences only happens sometimes. However 31.9% (85) have a contrary opinion. The table suggests that most respondents are of the opinion that journalistic reports are seldom tilted towards journalist’s personal ideology.

Table 2: Influence of Media Owners on News Reportage

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE %
Always	17	6.4
Most times	123	46.2
Sometimes	109	41.0
Not at all	17	6.4.0
TOTAL	266	100

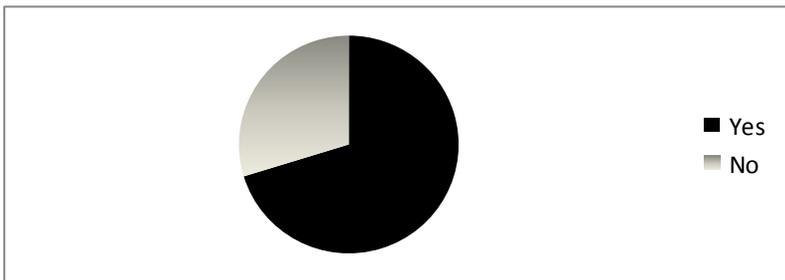
Source: Survey, March, 2014.

A striking majority of the respondents are affirmative in various degrees. 6.4% (17) believe influence is always present, 46.2% (123) went for most times while 41% (109) think influence only happens sometimes. This is evident of that fact that media owners exert some form influence of varying degree on the objectivity of news reportage.

Respondents were also asked whether or not if government owned stations serves as mouthpieces of governments’ subjective opinion (see question 5). The following are the responses obtained.

70.3% respondents (187) believe that government owned stations are mouthpieces for the government. An overwhelming majority of the respondents are educated above the school certificate level. Hence these calibres of people are usually more exposed to information and new ideas and as such could deduce government’s influence.

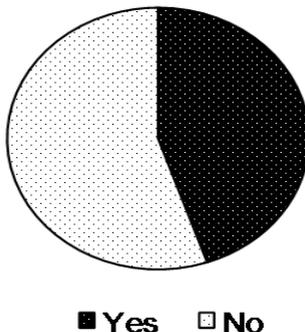
Pie Chart:



Source: Survey, March, 2014

In order to ascertain the degree of compliance of media practitioners to journalistic ethics, the study moved further to ask ‘if Nigerian media practitioners are subject to the ethical guidelines?’ The responses are presented in the pie chart below.

Pie Chart 1.2: Media Practitioners Adherence to Ethical Guidelines



Source: Survey, August, 2013

About 55.3% (147) of the respondents believe that media practitioners do not adhere to journalistic ethical guidelines, while 44.7% (119) have a contrary opinion.

In answering research questions 1 about influences of political and ideological convictions on objective reportage, the study found that journalistic reports are sometimes inclined to personal ideology, representing 35.7% of the respondents. However, there is a striking competition because a significant number of respondents representing 31.9% are of the opinion that reports are not influenced by the journalist’s personal ideology which is in conformity to the posit of Koch(1990) who argued that News is a social construct empowered by personal, cultural and institutional practice and is invariably based on social realities.

It was also found that news reports are widely watched amongst the research population at varying frequencies- about 25.5% watch

sometimes, 32.3% most times and 34.2% are frequent viewers that watch it always. This could be attributed to the fact that audience seeks to satisfy their information, educational and entertainment needs that television offers.

Additionally, a vast majority of the respondents representing 70.3% affirmed that government stations serve as mouth piece for governments' subjective opinion. These could be attributed to the respondents' level of exposure and accessibility to alternative sources like the Internet, BBM, Facebook, Twitter and satellite channels as sources of information. The study further moved to examine the extent to which ownership of media organisation influences objectivity in news reportage, which led to the rating of the influences at varying degrees. This also buttresses the negative responses to questions relating to the credibility of most media organisations and a justification why the audience switch to other alternatives for information.

In furtherance to the study, the research sought to determine the views that respondents have on objective reportage particularly reports on Occupy Nigeria Movement and an overwhelming majority of 260 (97.7%) respondents either think the source's credibility is absolutely questionable. This further reinforces the reason why most people believe the reportage on the Occupy Nigeria protest was generally discredited by most respondents.

Responses to research question 4 shows that to a large extent, most media organisation have either partially or absolutely lost their credibility and prestige as a result of a domineering subjectivity in their reportage. Factors that hinders the normal operations of journalistic practice were mostly attributed to influences by private and public owners, corruption and unprofessionalism, external pressure, inadequacy of equipment's and poor remunerations were responses to research question 5.

In conclusion, journalists are not only accountable to their bosses in order to maintain the status quo and make profits for their

organisations but are also answerable to their audiences in order to maintain their credibility and reputation. This can be attributed to the widely perceived notion by a majority of the respondents that the Occupy Nigeria protest was not objectively covered by the local media.

Conclusion

The tone, nature and structure of news reportage and general aims of communications policy on which broadcasting rest cannot be divorced from the ideological orientation of the nation in which it operates.

The study has effectively drawn logical judgement that owner of television stations affect the level of objectivity in news reportage. The researcher has come to a conclusion that the Occupy Nigeria Movement was not objectively reported as a result of influences on media organisations by its owners or other stakeholders. Media organisations credibility is solely determined by its objectivity or subjectivity reportage of events. It is evident that in the process of doing the bid of their owners, most media organisations have lost their credibility and consequently patronage by its audience.

This study establishes a model in objective reportage that extends and integrates the processes of media evolution in relation to accuracy, truthfulness and public accountability to the information it provides. Moving forward, the next obvious step is to begin a systematic inquiry into the implications of this transformative process for the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public. Despite the limitations mentioned, this study provides a wealth of information about the public, and more specifically, their expectations as a result of their level of exposure. The exploratory nature of the study also allowed for numerous areas to be examined, which included both psychological and demographic antecedents because credibility is very crucial in the relationship between the public and media organisations. To leverage its reputation and credibility in public eye and to maintain that binding relationship that

exists, media organisations must be able to reconcile journalistic principles in acquisition and dissemination of information.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it therefore recommends that there should be refinement in News content and reportage, a thorough investigation of facts by journalist during the News gathering process. It is only through this that sources can be verified and found reliable before news is disseminated to the public.

The existing new media environment has blurred the traditional boundaries between media users and sources. Now media users have different sources to pull from and as such distortions could be easily noticed. Media organizations must guard their reputation and credibility through fairness, truthfulness, accuracy and objectivity in disseminating information to the public.

To maintain its credibility and viewers, undue influence by Media Owners must be completely eliminated. The elite domination of the media wrapped around owners wealth and profit orientation and marginalisation of disseminating voices that translate to bias must be eliminated completely in order to uphold the integrity of media organisations. Training and retraining must be introduced to meet the electrifying changes and challenges in both technology and the craft of productions. This should reflect in better overall content.

The media must serve an essential function in the society by accepting and fulfilling certain obligations to the society. These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high professional standards of information, truth, unity, accuracy, objectivity and balance.

Journalists should embrace truth and impartiality in media practice, reinforce cultural standards and public opinion and a thorough acknowledgement of journalistic values

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