Navigating Ethical Dilemmas in Nigerian Journalism: Global, African, and Local Perspectives

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Abstract

Journalism in Nigeria, as in many democracies, is confronted with ethical dilemmas that test the balance between professional ideals and systemic pressures. This research explores how Nigerian journalists navigate these dilemmas within global, African, and national contexts, drawing on a qualitative literature review and the framework of Social Responsibility Theory. Findings reveal that while universal principles of accuracy, independence, and accountability remain benchmarks, journalists operate under structural constraints such as political ownership, censorship, poor remuneration, and safety threats. Specific Nigerian challenges (such as the persistence of "brown envelope" journalism, regulatory clampdowns like the suspension of AIT, and the dilemmas of digital reporting during #EndSARS) are situated within broader global concerns over misinformation and African realities of repression and economic precarity. The study contributes by synthesising these three levels of analysis into a comparative framework and proposing context-specific reforms: strengthening journalist unions, institutionalising fact-checking, improving working conditions, and advocating legal protections. It concludes that sustainable ethical practice in Nigeria requires addressing structural vulnerabilities while adapting global best practices to local realities.

Keywords: Journalism ethics, Nigeria, brown envelope syndrome, press freedom, social responsibility theory, digital media

Introduction

Ethical dilemmas occur when individuals, organisations, or governments face conflicting moral imperatives, where choosing one course of action compromises another. In a globalised and interconnected world, navigating such dilemmas has become more complex, with the consequences of decisions extending across national and cultural boundaries (Hellmueller & Berglez, 2023; de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, & Dodds, 2024; Kalfeli & Angeli, 2025).

As a philosophical perspective, ethics informs good behaviour and morality, which is embedded in the journalism profession. Thus, universally, journalism practice is guided by core ethical principles such as accuracy, balance, independence, and accountability, which are essential tools for maintaining credibility across media systems (Kubak, 2024; Steel et al., 2025). This ideal universal expectation makes journalism practice not only indispensable but also functions as a monitor between the government and the masses in a liberal democracy.

However, the global media environment reveals that these ideals often collide with complex realities (UNESCO, 2024; REUTERS, 2024). Ward (2015) confirms that in Western democracies, journalists contend with dilemmas surrounding privacy versus public interest, the balance between transparency and national security, and the challenge of combating misinformation in a digital ecosystem dominated by social media proliferation, and other complex ethical dilemmas involving reporting crime, non-disclosure of classified information, and accountability (Mills, 2018; Mokrosinska, 2020; Faisal, 2024). The WikiLeaks controversy, for example, exposed journalists to difficult questions about the limits of publishing sensitive documents that could endanger state security while serving the public's right to know.

Across Africa, the challenges of journalism are unique: journalists frequently operate in politically restrictive environments where authoritarian tendencies and weak democratic institutions expose them to censorship, harassment, and legal intimidation (Mwesige, 2004). Furthermore, economic fragility deepens the problem, with low remuneration and poor working conditions fostering practices such as 'brown envelope' journalism, where news coverage is commercialised in exchange for gifts or payments (Ndhlovu, 2022; Digest Press, 2023). Also, the multicultural and multiethnic nature of many African societies places journalists in ethically sensitive positions, as the framing of news on ethnic or religious issues can inadvertently fuel conflict or undermine national unity (Ajetunmobi, 2023). Worthy of note is the fact that African journalism operates in diverse political systems, from democracies like Ghana to autocracies like Eritrea, ranked last on the 2024 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Mabweazara (2018) had earlier communicated that economic constraints and low pay contribute to unethical practices like cash-for-coverage in under-resourced newsrooms, while Melvern (2000) cautions that ethnic, tribal and cultural sensitivities require careful reporting to avoid conflict, as evidenced by the

media's role in Rwanda's 1994 genocide. Safety risks are significant, with 12 African journalists killed in 2023 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023). Regional initiatives, such as the African Media Initiative, promote training and ethical standards to address these challenges (Karikari, 2017).

In Nigeria, which is the continent's most populous nation and largest democracy, these global and continental ethical tensions are compounded by structural, political, and cultural realities, as media ownership structures significantly influence editorial freedom, fairness, and objectivity (Igwe et al., 2024; Ojeka-John et al., 2024; Aruku et al., 2024), while political authorities frequently exert pressure on journalists, sometimes through censorship or the use of defamation laws, as seen in the arrests of investigative reporters who expose corruption (Sahara Reporters, 2025; CPJ, 2024).

Economic survival pressures intensify the temptation for unethical practices, while digital technologies have created new dilemmas surrounding misinformation, verification, and speed. The infamous clampdowns on Daily Trust and Africa Independent Television (AIT), widespread reports of "brown envelope" culture, and controversies surrounding coverage of the #EndSARS protests illustrate how Nigerian journalists navigate an environment where professional codes of ethics are in constant tension with systemic pressures (Uko, 2004; Okunna, 2015).

This paper therefore explores journalism's ethical dilemmas in Nigeria, situating them within a broader global and African framework. It interrogates how journalists experience and respond to these challenges, reviews literature and case studies, and suggests precautions that may safeguard professionalism and strengthen the watchdog role of the press.

Literature Review
Global Perspectives on Journalism Ethics
Globally, journalism ethics are grounded in ideals of accuracy, balance, accountability, and fairness, yet mounting evidence shows these principles increasingly collide with real-world pressures such as digital misinformation and political coercion (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2024; Rasheed & Adeleye, 2025).

Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's (1956) classic exposition of press theories highlights the tension between press freedom and social responsibility, noting that while the press must serve democracy, it must also respect societal norms. In contemporary times, dilemmas have intensified due to digital disruption. The proliferation of social media platforms has blurred the boundaries between professional journalism and citizen reporting, producing an ecosystem where misinformation spreads rapidly (Ward, 2015). Accordingly, Achonwa & Adedeji (2025) recommend that journalists must now balance the professional obligation to verify information with the competitive pressure to publish first.

The global media environment also raised questions about privacy and surveillance. The Edward Snowden revelations in the United States and the WikiLeaks disclosures exposed journalists to ethical debates over the balance between transparency and national security (Gleason, 2010). Bell & Owen (2017) also affirm that in a globalised environment, revelations such as those by Edward Snowden continue to spark ethical debates over the balance between transparency and national security. Similarly, coverage of terrorism has forced newsrooms in Europe and North America to confront whether reporting sensitive details serves the public interest or endangers lives. In response to terrorism-related tragedies, UK survivors and media professionals have advocated for specific guidelines (such as delaying contact with grieving families for 48 hours and avoiding excessive focus on perpetrators' identities) to prevent harmful or sensationalist reporting, thereby helping to balance public interest with compassion and safety (Survivors Against Terror group, 2025). These demonstrate that ethical dilemmas are not confined to developing nations but are universal features of modern journalism.

African Experiences of Ethical Dilemmas

Within Africa, scholars have consistently emphasised how fragile democracies and authoritarian tendencies complicate journalism practice (Mwesige, 2004). Journalists in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe have been imprisoned for critical reporting, highlighting the dangers of political repression. The commercialisation of news, coupled with low wages, has fostered "brown envelope" practices across African media systems, undermining journalistic independence and objectivity (Frère, 2011; Cleves Nkie Mongo, 2021; Acheampong, 2024).

The media's coverage during Kenya's 2007-2008 post-election crisis was widely criticised for exacerbating ethnic tensions rather than dampening them. Similarly, in Rwanda, media actors played a notorious role in escalating the 1994 genocide through ethnically charged broadcasts (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Baisley, 2014).

These examples underscore the profound responsibility African journalists bear in ensuring that reporting does not inadvertently deepen societal fissures.

Furthermore, many African journalists face dilemmas related to balancing professional codes with survival strategies. Weak institutional support means reporters often work without insurance, legal protection, or job security. As a result, their choices are shaped not only by professional ideals but also by considerations of personal safety and economic survival. (Omojunikanbi, 2024; Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism [WSCIJ], 2025; Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2025).

Ethical Challenges in Nigerian Journalism

Nigeria epitomises many of the broader African challenges while also presenting unique national dynamics. Ownership patterns exert profound influence, with media houses often controlled by politicians who expect loyalty in coverage (Oso & Pate, 2011). The suspension of AIT and RayPower FM in 2019 by the National Broadcasting

Commission highlighted how regulatory agencies can be weaponised against perceived opposition voices. For journalists, this creates an ethical dilemma: whether to uphold professional values or align with owners and political patrons to secure employment (Igwe, Guanah, Oshiokpu-Philip, & Edhere, 2022; Oloja, 2025; Uwalaka, Amadi, Nwala, & Wokoro, 2025).

Another persistent issue is the "brown envelope" syndrome, a term widely used in Nigeria to describe inducements offered to journalists in exchange for favourable coverage. Okunna (2015) and Okoro & Ugboaja (2020) argue that poor remuneration is a structural driver of this practice, which erodes trust in the press and weakens the watchdog role. In a recent study, Egielewa (2022) confirmed that poor and irregular salaries remain major drivers of brown envelope practices in Nigeria. Wana Data (2023) and Nigerian Informer (2025) decried a systematic betrayal where Nigerian journalists often face severe remuneration challenges with entry-level salaries sometimes dropping to ₦12,000 per month, wage arrears, and irregular payment schedules. These are conditions that help fuel brown-envelope practices. Other research evidence consistently links poor working conditions to ethical lapses in Nigerian journalism. Ahmed, Mustapha, Abdulbaqi, and Aliagan (2020) observed that inadequate remuneration and weak institutional oversight encourage the persistence of "brown envelope" practices and other forms of corruption in the media. Building on this, Apuke and Omar (2021) found through surveys and interviews that economic pressures, limited training, and job insecurity in online journalism foster misinformation, sensationalism, and breaches of objectivity. Similarly, Abubakre (2024) showed that resource constraints and ownership interference prevent journalists from engaging in robust investigative reporting, often resulting in compromised coverage of corruption. Alade, Oyegoke, Ojewumi, and Okunade (2024) further demonstrated that although journalists are aware of professional codes, structural barriers such as poor pay, political influence, and regulatory weakness hinder consistent adherence. Collectively, these studies reveal that systemic pressures, rather than individual failings alone, continue to undermine ethical journalism in Nigeria.

National security reporting further complicates ethical practice. The 2019 Daily Trust raid, where military personnel stormed the newspaper's offices following reports on counter-insurgency operations, exemplifies the risks of publishing sensitive information. Journalists must weigh their duty to inform against the possibility of state retaliation, imprisonment, or harm (Idowu, 2014).

Digital media has also reshaped Nigeria's ethical terrain. During the #EndSARS protests in 2020, journalists faced unprecedented dilemmas between immediacy and verification. Citizen-generated content, such as DJ Switch's livestream from the Lekki Toll Gate, challenged official narratives but also introduced significant concerns about misinformation and source credibility (Time, 2020; Oguchi et al., 2022). As Adeleke (2021) notes, Nigerian journalists must now navigate a dual battlefield: countering state suppression on one hand and misinformation on the other.

Similarly, safety remains a significant ethical consideration. Nigerian journalists are frequently harassed, assaulted, or detained, forcing them to practise self-censorship. Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists have documented multiple cases where reporters abandoned investigative stories due to threats, illustrating how physical insecurity constrains professional decision-making (Olukotun, 2002; Time, 2020; Oguchi et al., 2022).

Comparative Analysis

Nigeria shares global challenges like misinformation but faces intensified economic and political pressures. Compared to Africa, Nigeria's media is more diverse but struggles with overt political ownership and bribery. Localised solutions, such as addressing "brown envelope" culture through better pay and enforcing ethical codes, are critical within global and African frameworks (Oyegoke, Ojewumi, & Ifeduba, 2025; Nigeria Union of Journalists [NUJ] President, as cited in ICIRNigeria, 2025).

Hope is not lost in navigating this plethora of ethical dilemmas because by integrating global best practices, leveraging African networks, and addressing Nigeria's unique realities, journalists can uphold their democratic role. Future research should incorporate primary data from Nigerian journalists to deepen insights into evolving ethical practices (De-Lima-Santos et al., 2024; Alade et al., 2025).

Table 1: Synthesis of the key ethical dilemmas across Global, African, and Nigerian contexts

Context	Key Ethical Dilemmas	Illustrative Issues / Cases
Global	Privacy vs. public interest	WikiLeaks & Snowden disclosures
	Misinformation & disinformation	COVID-19 misinformation on social media
	Surveillance & digital intrusion	Government surveillance of journalists (Snowden, 2013; Mills, 2018; Mokrosinska, 2020)
African	"Brown envelope" journalism	Routine bribery of reporters (Frère, 2011; Mongo, 2021)
	Ethnic/tribal sensitivity in reporting	Coverage of Rwandan genocide & Kenyan post-election violence
	State repression & censorship	State clampdowns on opposition media (Acheampong, 2024)
Nigerian	Politicized media ownership	AIT/RayPower suspension (2019)
	Brown envelope" culture (poor pay)	Journalists accepting inducements (Okunna, 2015; Egielewa, 2022)
	Security reporting & censorship	Daily Trust newsroom raid (2019)
	Digital dilemmas during #EndSARS	#EndSARS livestream & disinformation (2020)

Theoretical Insights into Media Ethics in Nigeria

To analyse these dilemmas, Nigerian journalism can be situated within the broader framework of normative press theories. The Social Responsibility Theory posits that while the press enjoys freedom, it must also act in ways that protect societal welfare and democratic values (Siebert et al., 1956). In Nigeria, the application of this theory is strained by political interference and economic pressures, which often push journalists away from responsibility and toward compromise (Aondover et al., 2024).

Additionally, the African context has inspired scholarship on development media theory, which stresses that in developing societies, the media should prioritise nation-building goals. However, critics argue that in Nigeria, this framework has often been misused to justify censorship and control under the guise of national unity (Oso & Pate, 2011).

Scholars also emphasise the political economy of the media, which situates ethical dilemmas within broader questions of ownership, funding, and commercialisation (McChesney, 2008). In Nigeria, this approach explains why journalists are vulnerable to inducements and why editorial independence is so frequently compromised. Together, these theoretical insights illuminate the structural roots of ethical challenges in Nigerian journalism and suggest that solutions must address systemic as well as individual factors.

Findings

The review of literature and case studies reveals that ethical dilemmas in Nigerian journalism are both structural and situational. First, political interference and ownership influence remain dominant. The 2019 suspension of AIT and RayPower FM demonstrated how regulatory power can be used to curtail dissenting media voices, leaving journalists torn between professional loyalty and institutional survival.

Second, the persistence of "brown envelope" journalism underscores the role of economic vulnerability. With salaries often irregular or insufficient, journalists accept inducements to cover events or slant reports. This practice erodes credibility, undermines objectivity, and damages public trust.

Third, security-related ethical dilemmas frequently arise. The Daily Trust raid in 2019 highlighted the dangers of publishing sensitive reports on counter-insurgency operations. Journalists covering insurgency in the Northeast often face the choice between informing the public and protecting themselves from state reprisals.

Fourth, the digital revolution has created new ethical complexities. During the #EndSARS protests, journalists contended with the rapid circulation of unverified information. The viral livestream from the Lekki Toll Gate revealed state violence but also underscored the risks of misinformation in emotionally charged contexts.

Finally, journalists' physical safety emerged as a recurrent issue. Reports from Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists confirm frequent

arrests, assaults, and threats, which force journalists to self-censor or abandon stories. These patterns reveal that Nigerian journalists operate within an environment where ethical practice is often constrained by external threats and internal vulnerabilities.

Precaution

To strengthen ethical journalism in Nigeria, several precautions should be taken, given the reality that improving the ethical landscape of Nigerian journalism requires a multidimensional approach that addresses both structural and professional concerns. First, improving the ethical landscape of Nigerian journalism requires addressing structural issues such as poor remuneration, as undercompensated journalists are more vulnerable to "brown envelope" practices (News Digest Press, 2023; Public Relations Review, 2025). To complement this, independent and transparent regulation is essential. Agencies such as the National Broadcasting Commission and the Nigerian Union of Journalists must be insulated from political control to prevent arbitrary sanctions against perceived opposition voices, as evident in recent regulatory overreach (SERAP & NGE, 2025).

Furthermore, diversifying media ownership also offers a pathway to reducing political interference, with scholars noting that cooperative and community-based media models are more likely to prioritise public interest over partisan agendas (Media Ownership Interests, 2025). At the same time, legal reforms, particularly the decriminalisation of defamation and the strengthening of whistleblower protections, remain necessary to safeguard press freedom and reduce the use of law as a weapon against journalists (CPJ, 2024). Professional development and continuous training in ethics, fact-checking, and conflict-sensitive reporting further enable journalists to adapt to digital and political challenges while maintaining professional standards (Alade et al., 2025).

Equally important are safety mechanisms, including the provision of protective equipment, insurance, and institutional support for reporters working in conflict zones. Such measures align with global calls for improved journalist safety protocols in fragile democracies (IFJ, 2024). Finally, in an era of rampant misinformation, digital literacy and robust verification protocols are essential. Collaboration between newsrooms and fact-checking organisations has been identified as a viable strategy for protecting audiences and restoring public trust in journalism (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024). If these precautions are systematically implemented, they would not only safeguard Nigerian journalists but also significantly enhance the credibility of the country's media and its democratic function.

Conclusion

Journalism in Nigeria remains a profession defined by resilience amid adversity. Yet, ethical dilemmas persist, ranging from political interference and commercialisation to insecurity and digital misinformation. The evidence from the foregoing shows that

Nigerian journalists operate in an environment where adherence to professional codes is often undermined by systemic pressures beyond individual control.

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