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## Ethics, democracy and mass media: A necessary wheel for good governance in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Ethics, democracy and mass media are interconnected like a triangle and necessary for a better society. The media disseminate information in the society. Democracy is a people's centered government practiced with ethical principles and publicized through the media. In a democratic society, where the decision of the masses is supreme, mass media is instrumental in ensuring that the people make informed decisions with moral supervision. Ethics on the other hand, sets out principles that help in breeding morality in media and democracy. In order to help the media or democracy fulfil its aim of providing reliable information, or good governance ethical codes are required. However, it is through the media that the masses are able to voice their opinions. And without ethics media and democracy will collapse and vice versa. In these regards, this paper postulates that the mass media, ethics and democracy are like a circled wheel of a society necessary for good governance in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** ethics, democracy, mass media, good governance

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### Introduction

#### The Problem Setting

Democracy, mass media and ethics play a crucial role for the constitution of public reason; as well as contribute to good governance in the society (Fragen, A. 1996:283) <sup>[6]</sup>. Like a triangle, the media, ethics and democracy are invariably joined. However, the media is acting as a bridge between the state and public. It plays a role of informer, motivator or leader for healthy democracy at all levels. Ethics establishes moralities, ideals and opinions that people use to analyse or interpret a situation and then decide what is the right way to behave.

In our society, it is free to discharge duties but mass media needs to follow ethics in collecting and disseminating the information by ensuring objectivity and fairness in passing of information to the society. While democracy is popularly regarded as the government of the people, for the people and by the people and which gives equal chance to all the citizens to participate and play a significant role in the political process, ensures and guarantees certain rights and freedoms to the people constituting the policy requires moral precepts and media publicity for a better society.

From the above, the mass media, ethics, and democracy put together are relevant for a better environment. For instance, ethics instil morality for good governance. The media as well publicize democracy so as to inform and make the citizens aware of their government activities and vice versa. This paper tends to state clearly that mass media, ethics and democracy are inseparable in our contemporary society.

In view of the above presentation, it is now very necessary to identify the key concepts in this review. This paper has noted three major concepts that would be of great use towards this attempt to show the interconnectedness of the tripod to good governance in Nigeria. The three key concepts include: (a) Ethics; (b) Democracy; (c) Mass Media. Let us try a brief survey of the underlined concepts.

#### Ethics: The Nexus between Right and Wrong

It must point out that, the Greek philosophers were not primarily interested in ethics but in speculations concerning the constitution of the universe. Nevertheless, they made fragmented contributions to moral theory. Among these were the Pythagoreans, Heraclitus, Democritus and Anaxagoras. Others are the sophists. In the golden age we have the likes of Socrates, whose life and teaching earned him the "fonder of ethical studies". The contribution of Aristotle and Plato were no less than great (Onuoha, J.A. 2007:1) <sup>[19]</sup>.

Socrates a moral philosopher of the highest order. He was devoted to the search for knowledge which he equated with virtue. Socrates opined that "no one does evil willingly". That is to say, the intention of an act is geared towards a good. Notwithstanding, Socrates warned that before carrying out any action, one must first examine oneself to know where the action leads to, thus his famous saying "an unexamined life is not worth living" (Onuoha, J.A.

2007:8) <sup>[19]</sup>. Thereby advocating for moral conviction, and stressing the need for the control of feelings and moderation of actions. This, he imbedded in his theory laden statement “know thyself” and “avoid excesses”. Plato’s moral teaching is seen in his tripartite theory of human soul. He describes the soul as having three part – reason, spirit, and appetite and all these three parts are in constant conflict in order to satisfy their egoistic urge. The activities of the first part reason tend towards the goal or value of life. The spirit which is the second part is neutral in its action. The last part is the appetitive soul which only seek for the desire of the body (Onuoha, J.A. 2007:11).

The function or act as a person is to function rationally and rationality is directed towards objectivity. Therefore, Plato and Aristotle agree on the idea of good which every human action is directed to, must be an objective one. However, the good can be corrupted by means of its attainment. With this in mind Aristotle distinguishes between two major kinds of ends which posited as; instrumental ends that is acts that are done as means of other ends and intrinsic end which is acts that are done for their own sake (Stumpf, S.E. 1994:98).

Aristotle in his introduction to Nicomachean Ethics writes; “every act and every inquiry and similarly every action and pursuit in thought to aim at good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim”. Aristotle ethics is rooted in the mean. It plays an important role in moral virtue. For him, human attitude is affected by the feeling of excesses and defective. For instance, the desire for good may become habitually excessive or defective. If excessive, it will lead to the vice and if one is disinterested, it will lead to the vice of defect. Therefore, the moral mean is a virtue (Onuoha, J.A. 2007:14) <sup>[19]</sup>.

From the philosophical point of view, ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the science of good and evil, right and wrong, culpable and inculpability of human behaviour (Onuoha, J.A. 2007:15) <sup>[19]</sup>. Ethic according to Omoregbe (1993:4) “is the systematic study of the fundamental principles of the moral law; or as the normative science of human conduct”. In agreement with this Eboh (2005:3) <sup>[3]</sup> posits that:

Ethics is the study of values in reals of human conduct and it  
Deals with such question as what is good for human beings?  
What criterion or standard do we employ in making such a  
Decision or ...judgment? And what actually do we refer to  
When we say that a certain action is morally right or wrong?

From all interpretation, ethics seems to be a systematic step to understand and practice moral precepts and justify moral principles and theories as right or wrong. Hence, ethics is about moralities or moral values, ethical code, ideals, and opinions that people use to analyse or interpret a situation and then decide what is the right way to behave leading to human conduct in society.

### **Mass Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Mass media is a channel of communication networks, broadcasting medium via which news, entertainment, education, government, legal and other various information are circulated among people. It provides knowledge and makes society aware of various legal, political, social, economic, educational activities happening around the world. Dan Laughy (2008:1) <sup>[8]</sup> defined media as technologies that spread the messages to masses in different parts of a region, country and the world.

The media has grown lately to what it used to be before. The 21<sup>st</sup> century new media uses digital technology and the internet. New media include all forms of communication in the digital world like the internet, and social media platform like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, blogs, social networking sites, and video-sharing websites, anyone can underwrite concepts on the web, etc. has increase interpersonal communication, product promotion, information dissemination, political activism and governance. They are more instant, and can reach a large number of people. The internet has added a whole new autonomous measurement to communication. The immediate dispersal of news, a variety of different perceptions on a single event, and the ability to communicate with people all over the globe are advantages of social media.

It is also significant that information and communication boundaries have been breached between personal and individuals, professional, and between nations, through international networks that bring people together as never before (Cornelis, R. 2012). However, the introduction of hybrid computers and digital telecommunications is also changing the modes of information dissemination. Updates of catalogues, computer software, and archival databases are distributed via e-mail, a method of rapidly forwarding and storing bodies of digital information in the world. Similarly, the traditional modes of informal communications are being replaced by e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, and electronic conferencing. This has made available massive information that can be mined for social analytics, knowledge base, policymaking, and scientific research.

### **Democracy as a Form of Government**

Mbah (2006:132) <sup>[9]</sup> in his book Political Theory and Methodology, the origin of democracy can be traced back to the ancient Greece. Greeks originally used the idea to mean the ‘poor’ or the ‘many’. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, in the Greek city states, democracy was designed to allow all citizens to have a voice in decisions that would affect all. This right was exercised at mass meetings and approximated to what we call today as direct democracy.

According to Obonyano (2020:6) <sup>[12]</sup>, Democracy is derived from the Greek words *demos* which means ‘the people’ and *cracy* which stands for ‘rule’ or ‘government’. Democracy literally means the rule of the people. In

memorable words of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. By the very definition, Mazi Mbah (2006:132) <sup>[9]</sup> democracy implies that the ultimate authority of government is vested in the common people, so that public policy is meant to conform to the will of the people. Government on the other hand, could be defined as that organization that is the governing authority of a political unit. Government has the power to make laws, adjudicate disputes, and to issue administrative decisions, and with a monopoly of authorized force to bring to compliance, all for the peace and harmonious existence of the peace.

Democracy is a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system. Democracy has results in wise policies, a just and free society, decisions which promote the public interest or the common good. It is a legislative process, fairness in the sense of treating as equal all citizens' interests that arise out of their membership in the political community, or fair compromise (Fragen, A. 1996:281) <sup>[6]</sup>.

In the strictest sense, Michele Nicoletti (2000:87) <sup>[21]</sup> the term 'democracy' refers to a form of government'. According to classical definitions from Plato to Montesquieu, 'democracy' indicates a form of government in which power is not exercised by a monarch or aristocracy, but by people who are in a position to make decisions concerning their own political community; either in a direct or indirect way through their representatives. From the above definitions, democracy is a form of social organisation and procedural decision-making.

### **Governance in Nigeria**

Good governance involves the political and institutional processes needed to achieve human rights and to achieve the goals of development in a civil society. On this very note, good governance in Nigeria is a thing of concern. Since Nigeria gained independence till this fourth republic, it has witnessed all manner of governance such as military, parliamentary, presidential, and democratic systems but all seem not to have guaranteed common good of the people. Instead, it has plunged majority of the citizens into economic hardship and poverty and is now a threat to good governance (Eze, V.E.2018:1).

Obonyano (2022:8) stated that in today's world, leadership is everything. It helps in driving every meaningful society into national growth and development. The leadership pattern in Nigeria has encouraged bribery and corruption, ethno-nationalism, and injustice. Unfortunately, being among the unfortunate nations witnessing bad leadership. In this regard, Achebe (1983:1) agrees that, the problem with Nigeria is bad leadership. Nigeria is among the unfortunate nations that are witnessing bad leaders. In Nigeria particularly, our leaders believe that the success of leadership is measured by the ability of the leader to serve his political party, his clan, the interest of friends, or his private interest, in certain circumstances.

Godfatherhood has been part of politics in Nigeria. A God-Father is someone who is respected, influential, and powerful in the society, they are seen as people who own the town (Nwankwo, 2009:19) <sup>[11]</sup>. Obviously, Godfather begets Godson. Politicians in Nigeria now use the term godfatherhood to refer to their relationship with their subordinates. A political God-father is seen as the lord and master of political game, he alone is the majority. He gives favours only at his whims and caprices, that is, only when he feels that it would advance his personal aggrandizement (Nwankwo, 2009:19) <sup>[11]</sup>.

During election, politicians in Nigeria who directly or indirectly create artificial poverty, hunger and starvation in the country applied thugs in hijacking ballot boxes in order to emerge as winners against the people's choice. The current practice is the introduction of the slogan "stomach infrastructure" politics. This approach is about providing excessive food items like rice, beans, garri, wheat and condiment to bribe voters to sell their conscience. Most embarrassing of it is that, these politicians shamefully inscribe their names and political parties on the well-packaged items to bring the message across. Instead of the selling of themselves to the people through manifestoes they choose to adopt deceitful means to market their incompetence. The worst of it all is sharing of money (dollar) to party delegates to vote them as party flagbearer. This action brought about the dollarization of party primary in the recent conclusion of APC and PDP primary election; where about each delegate goes home with \$15,000 to \$20,000 thousand US Dollar. It is laughable that delegate is now a career in the Nigerian political system. The result of this uncivilized system is continued breed of incompetent leaders in offices that required leaders with intellectualism and problem-solving capabilities needed to adequately address systemic issues of poverty and injustice.

Nigeria is now recognised as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. There is no gain saying that embezzlement of public funds and neglect of humanistic policies have brought corruption in high places. For instance, Acting Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Ibrahim Magu, was arrested by Department of State Service (DSS) over alleged corruption involving ₦40 million property. Also, on May 18, 2022, the Accountant General of the Federation, Ahmed Idris, was suspended indefinitely over alleged ₦80 and ₦90 billion fraud. The situation where a senator goes home with 44 million naira monthly pay package, which amounts to 528 million naira annually in addition to the 500 million constituency vote yearly for a period of 4 year's tenure continues if there is re-election was seen by right thinking people as gross abuse and waste of resources especially when the ASUU (Academic Staff Union of University) is always on strike for lack of funding (Okoro, M.O. 2010:131). The list is endless, because there are countless and undiscovered levels of looting of public funds in the Nigerian political system. For Achebe, leaders are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable; they will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made

difficult and inconvenient. Corruption does not ensue equity and justice but encourages injustice. Corruption has become part and parcel of Nigeria's political system and stumbling block to good governance.

### **The Tripod Stand Wheel Necessary for Good Governance in Nigeria Ethics, Democracy, and Mass Media**

The problem of Nigeria is multi-facet. On account of this, the paper postulated that this problem will be resolved if and only if this country sees ethics, democracy and mass media as a necessary wheel for good governance. According to Ozumba (2008:39), ethics is very important in every province of lifetime. Ethics, if not studied for the weal it brings to mankind, should be studied for its intellectual excitement. With knowledge of ethics individual is in a position to understand, analyse and can achieve the final goal of life with proper decisions. The study of ethics helps individual for thoughtful consideration of ethical ideas. It supports individual in understanding of certain fundamental principles of logical and moral. For proper and peaceful life, the society is framed by authorities, values, culture and beliefs. Ethics is a pioneer of rules and regulations in human society.

Ethics is also interested in knowing what makes certain judgments to qualify as moral judgments and what sort of concepts would qualify as moral concepts. The fact here is that, ethics should not be perceived as a discipline that is walled into a narrow perspective. It extends into many fields, like law, politics, aesthetics, theology, psychology, literature etc. For instance, we talk about punishment in ethics which is directly relevant in law, we talk of justice which is has bearing on politics – distribution of state power, other resources and so on (Ozumba, 2008:42).

According to Begum (2014), media acts as a disseminator of information and a channel of communication between people and the government. The media educates people by providing wealth of information related to social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of the society. In like manner, Esan (2016:8) suggests that media are influential so they abound and circulate particular knowledges and viewpoints. Media are universal, more readily retrieved via a variability of platforms.

Furthermore, mass media is any medium that provides citizens with information regarding all the current affairs of any area at a large scale. The media plays one of the most important roles in the functioning of any society. However, access to information is essential for a democratic society because it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Media therefore is a backbone to democratic publicity. For example, free and fair elections conducted through transparent processes require a media sector which gives candidates equal access, and reports the relevant issues in a timely, objective manner.

Many countries of the world have adopted democracy as a system of government. Nigeria is an emerging democratic society since the 1999 which mark the beginning of the Fourth Republic. The face of democracy today in Africa is one defined by coercion and intimidation (2006:146). The democracy of Nigeria according to Okonkwo is not *Demos* center because of the lack of devotions to the public weal, democratic-rule-following, implicit traits and skills of good governance.

The problem with Nigerian democracy centers on the increase in terrorists' activities, kidnapping, banditry, unknown gunmen, agitations, boko haram insurgence, bad leadership, religious bigotry all have hampered democratic dispensations of good governance in Nigeria. In agreement, Okonkwo stated that based on the above factors, democracy in Nigeria has so far not protected and projected the representation of a civil society, the coordination of the people's will and mandate, the common national values, resourceful guidance of available skills, peaceful control, co-existence, national identity as a pride of place, responsible social political ideologies etc.

However, democracy as witnessed in Nigeria can be defined as the governance of the selected by the selected for the selected (Okonkwo, 2016:105). This implies that, the Nigerian political praxis is about personality. In Nigeria, the system is a respecter of the high and mighty in the society. The ordinary man is treated with little or no regards. The Nigerian democratic practices so far, have not excelled in the areas of the politics of equals, equal citizenship participatory democracy as the theory of the people's-rule (Okonkwo, n.d:4). The present Nigerian democracy is a non-institutionalized democracy because of the in-depth violations and contributions of the fundamental human rights, moral rights, inherent virtues, rule of law and the essence of being human.

Also, bad leadership is amajor problem to the democratic practice in Nigeria. Democracy has been short-changed to mean 'the governance of the elected by themselves and for themselves'. The people are no more the focus in the Nigerian democratic agenda in spite of the fact that the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, Section 14-(2) (327-328) states that: "sovereignty belongs to the people; the security and welfare of the people should be the primary purpose of governance; the participation by the people in their government shall be ensured in accordance with the provisions of this constitution". In agreement with Joseph (1991:56), democracy is yet to succeed in Nigeria. One of the major reasons is what he called 'prebendal (god-fatherhood) politics' in Nigeria.

The media are undoubtedly part of the institution of democracy, so much that they have been interpreted as the "fourth power" next to the three traditional powers of the state: legislative, executive and judiciary. In particular, in the American experience, the press has been conceived as the 'watchdog' of citizens against abuses of the government (2000:92). In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, article 19 underlies the right of "searching, obtaining, propagating information" (2000:93). Hence, a special relationship exists between the

media and the government. While the government is seeking to manipulate the news, the news is also seeking to manipulate the government. Omenukor (2015:47) avers:

The media continue to manipulate the way public officials conduct themselves through the advancement of technology.

For instance, life television coverage of legislative proceedings exposes unjust arguments and rulings throughout the government process. On the other hand, although freedom of the media may be constitutionally provided for with precise legal definitions and enforcement, but the exercise of that freedom by members of the media remains a matter of personal choice and ethics.

In a democratic system, it is the right of the citizen to publish without any prior permission from the government or any other public authority, subject only to the legal liability for what he has chosen to publish. A democracy must fix rules of communication, which facilitate the free exchange of information and knowledge among subjects, but it must also favour the life of groups and associations which wish to avoid a certain levelling (Michelle, N. 2000:110). Media, thus plays a vital role in the formulation of public opinion on issues of public importance. The ultimate goal of media is to serve the public interest and enhance democracy.

From all indication, it is an undeniable fact that the media have played a crucial role in the political ascent of leaders. However, the necessary prerequisite for an authentic democracy is that citizens possess the necessary information and knowledge in order to make independent decision. It is clear the recent development in media has provided citizens with an amount of information which is, greater than in the past. It has increased the number of well-informed citizens (2000:94). For instance, Nigerian citizens know about politics as they did 20 years earlier, because of the increased in information. The ENDSARS protest of that occurred October 20, 2020 is a typical example of the influence and impact of the media to stop police brutality and government insensitivity towards its citizens. In essence, I would say that the media through techno-politicsh as contributed to advancement of democracy or birth of modern democracy in the society.

Media like Television and radio, and other social media platforms have made a significant achievement in educating rural illiterate masses in making them aware of all the events in their governance. The media also exposes loopholes in the democratic system, which ultimately helps government in filling the vacuums of loopholes and making a system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly. A democracy without media is like a vehicle without wheels.

The media is the watchdog of our democracy. In democratic society, a special relationship exists between media and government. Modern democratic government subsists in representation. For the representatives to be accountable, and for the process of government to be transparent, effective communication paths must exist to their constituents. Today these paths consist primarily of the mass media, to the extent that if media freedom disappeared, so would most political accountability (Moyers, B. 2003).

As a circle, mass media goes with publicity of any form. Ethics proposes good moral conducts of people. Democracy as well deals with peoples-oriented policies such as general elections and other voting procedures which requires general awareness, acceptability, and common good. In all these, ethics is required for a well-coordinated mass media, the democracy demands an ethical code for effective policies. Media aids in advertising governance. In a nutshell, mass media plays a significant role such as information, educating and entertaining the masses. It is known to be an important player in democracy and the smooth functioning of the nation. Media is the watchdog of society. Ethics works to established and direct the rightness and wrongness man in the society. Hence democracy requires mass media, while democracy and mass media needs ethics for live to flourish (Fragen, A. 1996:279) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **My Take: The Conclusion**

From the paper so far, it is clear that, the media has played great role behind the formation of public opinion which can force the political parties to address the core issues haunting the country's progress. It is thus referred to as the fourth pillar of democracy. Achieving good governance and democratic society requires good ethical practices, understanding and participation of every member of society. The media, their significant roles, channels and contents, are considered to be the most powerful weapon to make this achievement a reality. On this note, the mass media creates a sphere in moulding public opinion, structuring public debate and making the government answerable to the people. It provides a communication link between individuals and groups. Media role main value is in interpreting basic societal standards of right and wrong which individual movements and suggestions may be mediated right or wrong.

Ethics like Ozumba (2008:40) assert provides the touchstones or rational justifications for our moral action. One cannot imagine the volume of confusion, anarchy and chaos that would have characterized the world without a provision for the rules of good moral coexistence. However, a democracy without considering ethics will be selfish and degenerate into a form of governance of the elected by the elected for the elected (Okonkwo, 2016:105). Like Cicero would always say, remove ethics the world would collapse. The world today, even with moral rules and precepts, is decadent and at the verge of disintegration. Hence, the importance of ethics can better understand in the light of its perception as the rule giving-umpire, this time in the game of morality. The media on its sides help in bring democracy to its door-step. Making good governing reaching a part of the society.

The media monitor, investigate, and reports government activities, to ensure peoples interested are protected. This help to reduce corrupt practices in governance and ensure common good and values actualizes in the member society. With making an effort to understand each other's, the potential for collaboration and civil discourse among these three sectors will only continue to integrate. The concept of ethics, media, democracy and political deliberation tied to publics guides us through the entire Bermuda-triangle where all possibility for effective communication mysteriously appears. (Fragen, A. 1996:289) <sup>[6]</sup>. With this, democracy can be sustained and ethics becomes relevant with the impact of mass media. My stand is that, democracy alone as it stands in Nigeria might not guarantee good governance. Good governance is possible if the ethical codes and principles are practiced under the watch of the mass media and other media apparatus. This is because they are the necessary wheel for governance in a modern society and Nigeria is not an exception.

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