

# Assessment of media ownership and the burden of objectivity in news reporting among journalists in imo state, Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>Etumnu Emeka Williams, <sup>1</sup>Ibe, Sandra C., <sup>1</sup>Alaekwe, KizitoNzube, <sup>2</sup>Nkwocha Chike Martin <sup>1</sup>Okalla, Fabian & <sup>1</sup>Iredibia, Kingsley Uche

<sup>1</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Rhema University, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria

## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** Ownership of the media frequently affects how well they function as the "fourth estate of the realm." Reporters covering anything from everyday happenings to major events are typically required to exhibit a genuine sense of objectivity in their reporting, regardless of the ownership pattern of the media. This study evaluated Nigerian Imo State journalists' ownership of the media and their obligation to report news objectively.

**Method:** The research design used in the study was survey. The tool used to obtain the data was a questionnaire. The population and sample size for the study consisted of 197 Imo State-based registered and active journalists.

**Results:** The findings showed that Imo State journalists have a very high level of knowledge on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting, with mean score of  $3.6 \pm 0.55$  (maximum was 4). Journalists in Imo State adhere to the ethical precept of objectivity in news reporting to a low degree, with a mean of  $2.4 \pm 0.99$ . The results also indicated that media owners usually have negative influence on journalists' practices regarding objectivity especially when it has to do with their interest.

**Conclusion:** There is high level of knowledge by the journalists on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting. Despite this knowledge their level of compliance to the ethical code is low. Also, media ownership has a way of influencing journalism practice regarding objectivity in news reporting.

## Keywords:

Journalists, Media Ownership, Objectivity, and Reporting

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Due to its social responsibility role in society and their ability to checkmate the actions of the three arms of government—the executive, legislative, and judicial—the media has come to be seen as the "fourth estate of the realm" over time (Nnah, 2019). In a democracy, the media serves a variety of purposes, including socialization, surveillance, and the linkage of societal events. These are additional duties on top of those that involve entertaining audiences, teaching them, spreading culture, and providing information (Lai, 2013). For this reason, Ochonogor and Nwanmereni (2017) maintain that the media's ability to enlighten the public and inspire support for causes that are important to them is still widely acknowledged. According to Adomi (2017), there are a number of issues that the practice of journalism in developing nations like Nigeria must deal with, including ownership, censorship, the law, and other issues. When reporting, journalists need to keep the ethical standards and ideals of their profession in mind. According to Wahl-Jorgensen et al. (2017), journalists actively control the narrative surrounding differing viewpoints on a given topic. They seek to assist a community to be more conducive to the formation of reasoned opinions while simultaneously representing the various viewpoints of the people they serve. This claim is further supported by the editorial guidelines of the BBC, which pledge to cover a range of viewpoints in our output over a suitable time period, ensuring that no important school of thought is purposefully left out or underrepresented. When evaluating the evidence and assessing material activities, journalists must always act fairly and impartially (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014).

According to Aliagan (2020), because ownership has an impact on media contents, ownership is a crucial component in understanding how content is created in the media. The term "ownership" refers to the different types of governance connected to certain ownership structures, and the people and businesses that control media are known as owners (Schlosberg, 2016). According to Sjøvaag and Ohlsson (2019), ownership of news media is important to journalism scholars because it is assumed that journalism can have an impact on public policy, culture, and debate. Additionally, owners use media to influence political developments and move societies in a particular direction for their own benefit (Babister, 2022). Ownership of the media frequently affects how well they function as the "fourth estate of the realm." This is why it is impossible to compare the level of freedom enjoyed by government-controlled media to that of privately held media (Odionye et al., 2018). According to Onyebuchi et al. (2017), truth, fairness, and balance in news reporting are fundamental principles of journalism practice that media organizations should uphold at all times, on all days, and in all circumstances. These ideas stem from the ethical precepts that guide journalism (Ilomuanya et al., 2023). Reporters covering anything from

everyday happenings to major events are typically required to exhibit a genuine sense of objectivity in their reporting, regardless of the ownership pattern of the media. They have to make sure that their reports are fair and balanced. This suggests that their reporting ought to be impartial. All parties concerned must receive equal attention in order to ensure this. Narratives shouldn't be biased. Opinions must be kept apart from the facts.

According to Udeze and Chukwuma (2011), who support the aforementioned, "objectivity in news reporting is emphasized in virtually all broadcasting codes and journalism ethics worldwide." For example, "all sides to any issue of public interest shall be equitably presented to ensure fairness" as stated in Nigeria's broadcasting regulation 3.3.3 (Udeze & Chukwuma, 2011). Walter Lippman championed the idea of impartiality in news reporting, urging journalists to evaluate facts using the scientific method so that readers would receive the truth rather than the reporter's interpretation of it (Matt, 2022). The fundamental tenet of journalism practice, according to Blueprint Newspaper (2023), is objectivity, which entails distancing oneself from the facts while upholding a high standard of justice and balance in providing an accurate account of events. According to Rogers (2019), objectivity in hard news reporting entails reporters not expressing their personal opinions, biases, or sentiments in their reporting. The concept of objectivity is still controversial since it can be interpreted in a variety of ways based on the background, interests, and positions of the people involved (McQuail, 2005; Frost, 2007). However, the first responsibility of a reporter and that of the media organisations is to be objective in their reportage, thus, devoid of biases and influences from any angle (Ogayi, 2016).

The degree of importance that a journalist or media organisation places on objectivity is sometimes used to assess the professionalism of that institution, accounting for ownership structure (Odionye et al., 2018; Fab-Ukozor, 2011). When a journalist becomes an owner, his stance as an employee may shift. The place of objectivity in the presentation of media reports is not only as it concerns adherence to the journalism professional codes of ethics, but more essentially as it concerns the importance of the provision of accurate account of events, issues, and development to advance social intelligence (Obayi, 2022). In the 20th century, the American press was charged with informing, entertaining, and defending the truth as part of its social responsibility doctrine. According to Ajilore et al. (2012), the media's ability to fulfil its social responsibility responsibilities in the society effectively depends on its recognition of truth and objectivity as philosophical ideas. This is in consonance with the social responsibility theory this study was anchored on. The theory came about through the Commission on Freedom of the Press first introduced in the United States in the 1940s (Konkwo, 2022). The theory postulates that the press should be allowed to do the tasks that libertarian ideology permits, but this freedom should be

coupled with a feeling of responsibility (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012 as cited in Obayi, 2022).

**1.1 Problem statement**

The overarching objectives of the media organisation are determined by the media owners. Truth and objectivity can be fostered or suppressed by the editor at the operational level. The editor, in his or her capacity as gatekeeper, has a significant impact on plurality in media content to the degree that space and airtime limitations restrict the number of everyday events that are covered by the media. It appears like a very competitive operating environment. Now that ownership influence is so prevalent, impartiality in news reporting is weakened, endangering the very idea of objectivity. Because of this, the media's unwavering goal to further ownership interests has hampered neutrality in the reporting and presentation of topics. In light of this, the study's objectives were to investigate Imo State journalists' ownership of the media and their obligation to report news impartially.

**1.2 Objective of the study**

The main objective of the study was to assess the media ownership and the burden of objectivity in news reporting among journalists in Imo State. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the knowledge level of journalists in Imo State on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting.
2. Find out the level of compliance to the ethical precept of objectivity in news reporting among journalists in Imo State.
3. Find out the influence of media ownership on the practices of journalists in Imo State with regards to objectivity in news reporting
4. Find out the perception of Imo State based journalists towards the influence of media ownership on their practices with regards to objectivity in news reporting.

**2. METHOD**

Survey research design was used in the study. This approach was selected to help create a precise and recognizable image of the target demographic for the sample. As a result, the survey is thought to be pertinent for the study because it was designed to get respondents' thoughts on the subject of study (Jumbo et al., 2023). According to the NUJ factsheet (2023), the study's population consists of 197 Imo State-based journalists who are registered and actively working. The census principle was used, in which the researchers took a sample of every member of the population after they have given their consents to be part of the study. Ethics and Informed consent Ethical approval was not needed for the study due to the fact that participation did not expose the journalists to hazards. All the journalists filled out consent forms. They also agreed that the study could be published in a journal on the understanding that their identities were kept secret. Since the study's population is small, the complete population was chosen as the sample size because, as Damico (2016) notes, a small, well-defined population lends itself to study. Obayi et al. (2020) has used this method and it proved to be effective. The researchers used the convenient sampling technique in reaching out to journalists in their various organisations. This method gave the researchers easy access to the journalists that were studied. At first, the researchers approached the journalists with the questionnaire after which they filled and returned to the researchers, this was done until all the journalists in the study were sampled. We thoroughly checked the instruments and discovered it was properly answered by the journalists. The tool utilized to acquire the data was a self-developed questionnaire structured in Likert scale format containing 12 items. The statistical approach used in analysing the data for the study was mean analysis. The researchers used 4 point Likert scale of which the benchmark for acceptance was set at 2.5 and above and then 2.4 below is rejection. The internal consistency of the instrument used for measurement was found to be 0.8 when the Cronbach alpha was employed to assess its reliability.

**3. RESULTS**

The researchers distributed 197 copies of the questionnaire in all. There was a 100% return rate. The analysis was presented in tables using mean analysis. The knowledge level of journalists in Imo State on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting. Result showed that the knowledge level of journalists in Imo State on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting proved to be high (3.6±0.55, Table 1).

**Table 1.** Respondents' responses on their knowledge level on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting (N=197)

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Objective reporting means reporting without bias	109	88	-	-	197	3.6	0.53	Accepted
I think it is telling stories devoid of my personal opinion	90	103	3	1	197	3.4	0.55	Accepted

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
It means accurate presentation of stories the way they happened	111	79	5	2	197	3.6	0.6	Accepted
It means truthful reporting of events	115	82	-	-	197	3.6	0.53	Accepted
Mean						3.6	0.55	Accepted

\*Abbreviations: SA – Strongly agree; A - Agree; D - Disagree; SD- Strongly Disagree; Std Dev.- Stand deviation.

††

If the calculated mean is equal or greater than the criterion mean (2.5), then the decision is accepted but if the calculated mean is lower than the criterion mean (2.5), the decision is rejected. Also, let 1-1.6 (very low), 1.7-2.4 (low), 2.5-3.2 (high) and 3.3-4.0 (very high).

The level of compliance to the ethical precept of objectivity in news reporting among journalists in Imo State. Result revealed that the level of compliance to the ethical precept of objectivity in news reporting among journalists in Imo State is low (2.4±0.99, Table 2).

**Table 2.** Respondents' responses on their level of compliance to the ethical precept of objectivity in news reporting

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
I keep to the precept of objectivity in news reportage at 100%	45	39	59	54	197	2.4	1.11	Rejected
I report stories the way they are irrespective of the media organisation policy	14	22	91	70	197	1.9	0.86	Rejected
I enjoy the latitude of freedom in my reports as a result of owner's interest	41	33	67	56	197	2.3	1.1	Rejected
Stories are presented according to the way the media wants	75	83	22	12	197	3.1	0.91	Accepted
Mean						2.4	0.99	Rejected

\*Abbreviations: SA – Strongly agree; A - Agree; D - Disagree; SD- Strongly Disagree; Std. Dev.- Standard Deviation.

The influence of media ownership on the practices of journalists in Imo State with regards to objectivity in news reporting. Result revealed that there is a high level of influence of media ownership on the practices of journalists in Imo State with regards to objectivity in news (3.0±0.55, Table 3).

**Table 3.** Respondents' responses on the influence of media ownership on their practices with regards to objectivity in news reporting

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
The principle of objectivity is often compromised	66	84	13	34	197	2.9	1.04	Accepted
Stories are sometimes slanted in favour of the power that be	63	74	33	27	197	2.9	1.01	Accepted
Freedom of the press is trespassed upon, infringed and suppressed	70	96	15	16	197	3.1	0.86	Accepted
Some stories that expose the corrupt practices of the power that control the media are not always carried	77	86	24	10	197	3.2	0.83	Accepted
Mean						3	0.93	Accepted

\*Abbreviations: SA – Strongly agree; A - Agree; D - Disagree; SD- Strongly Disagree; Std. Dev.- Standard Deviation

The perception of Imo State based journalists towards the influence of media ownership on their practices with regards to objectivity in news reporting? Result revealed that the respondents perceive the influence of media ownership on their practices with regards to objectivity in news reporting as a suppression on the freedom of the press, it makes journalism as a profession questionable and kills the trust the audiences and society have on the media (3.3±0.71, Table 4).

**Table 4.** Respondents' responses on their perception towards the influence of media ownership on their practices with regards to objectivity in news reporting

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
It kills the trust the audiences and society have on the media	91	84	14	8	197	3.3	0.77	Accepted
It makes journalism as a	89	94	8	6	197	3.4	0.7	Accepted

profession questionable								
It suppresses the freedom of the press	101	87	7	2	197	3.5	0.61	Accepted
It gives room for doubt and unbelievability from the audience	83	90	14	10	197	3.2	0.79	Accepted
Average Mean						3.3	0.71	Accepted

\*Abbreviations: SA – Strongly agree; A - Agree; D - Disagree; SD- Strongly disagree; Std. Dev- Stand deviation

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Our study showed that Imo State journalists' knowledge level of the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting is very high. The reason for this could be linked to their training and exposure to ethical principles in the field of journalism. It will be quite unpleasant to hear that journalists are not knowledgeable in their area of expertise. It also revealed the level of compliance to the ethical precept of objectivity in news reporting among journalists was low. This is so, perhaps, on the account that journalists do not hold the principle tenaciously as a result of certain factors such as harsh economic or even the environment where they find themselves, hence, the reason for the low compliance to ethical guideline on objectivity in news reporting. The journalists in Imo State do not enjoy the latitude of freedom in writing their reports as a result of owner's interest, and stories are presented according to the way the media want. This has always been the case with media ownership. Owners of media houses always dictate the tune hence limiting the freedom journalists working for such outlet enjoy. Media ownership pattern usually have a negative influence on journalists' practices regarding objectivity because respondents perceive the influence of media ownership on their practices concerning objectivity in news reporting as a repression of press freedom (mean score of  $3.3 \pm 0.71$ ) which casts doubt on journalism as a profession and undermines public confidence in the media. Having public confidence is one thing journalists crave for but in a situation where journalists hands are tied as a result of media owner's interest the masses will have the impression that report coming from such journalist-cum-the media house will be laced with bias because that is how the owner of the media house wants it. The following are the limitations of the study results. First, focus was on only journalists without considering factoring owners of this media. Studying them may have given this study another dimension and much depth. Secondly, other factors like personal bias; professional training that may affect objectivity in news reporting was not factored in the study.

The outcome of the first result supports the findings of Obayi (2022), which showed that respondents understand the principles of fairness and balance in news reporting at an average. In similar vein, the second result correlates with that of Obayi (2022), which showed that journalists apply very little fairness and balance to their news reporting. However, the finding contradicts the social responsibility theory postulation, which, according to Konkwo (2022), calls on the media to establish and uphold moral standards that serve the public interest. The third finding underscored how media ownership has a big influence on the techniques journalists utilize since press freedom is being curtailed, oppressed, and violated. In line with the finding, Imbul (2014) study gives strong backing by revealing that government owners have a substantial impact on radio news coverage and that the news covered serves owners' interests rather than the interests of the wider public. In view of this, Mordi and Ogbu (2017) observed that media owners do not seem to be the editors who have a lot of control over media contents—rather, they seem to be the main gatekeepers that decide what goes out.

Also in consonance with the results is Onyebuchi et al. (2017), who discovered that Rivers Radio shows frequently favour the government over the broader public and lack objectivity and professionalism. In a similar vein, Project Reserve (2021) demonstrated that news coverage is driven more by the interests of the owners (the government) than by the interests of the public and that journalistic methods are heavily impacted by these interests. According to Ochonogor and Nwanmereni (2017), ownership interests pose a challenge to the notion of objectivity. They also found that journalists in Port Harcourt modify their news reports to align with these interests. Their research went on to demonstrate that ownership interest could lead to the rejection of important news stories. Unarguably, the third result of this study runs counter to the social responsibility theory, which holds that the media must embrace and carry out specific societal tasks by upholding professional standards of truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance. Regarding the fourth result, which is supported by Aliagan (2020) showed that ownership influence on news contents exists in the two newspapers studied, it further revealed that direct intervention and self-censorship by journalists and editors in line with the owners' interests were the forms of influence that exist in Daily Trust and The Punch newspapers. Similarly, according to Onyebuchi et al. (2017),

Rivers Radio's programmes typically favours the government over the general people, devoid of professionalism and neutrality.

The theoretical implication of the study is that it helps to understand the demands of social responsibility theory irrespective of media ownership style because journalists are expected to be responsible and uphold objectivity in news reporting. Also, the results of the study has contributed to our understanding of the social responsibility theory by showing how journalists and media owners should act in accordance with the ethical guideline of journalism practice. This information may also serve as a guide to other researchers who may want to apply this theory in their studies related to media ethics. The practical implication of the study is media owners need to be re-orientated so that they will see the need to respect the ethical code of journalism so that their influence on news will be minimal or non-existing. Also, to journalists there is need for training so that they will see the need to comply with the ethical guidelines of their profession so as not to lose the public confidence or trust. In conclusion, there is high level of knowledge by the journalists on the ethical principle of objectivity in news reporting. Despite this knowledge their level of compliance to the ethical code is low. Also, media ownership has a way of influencing journalism practice regarding objectivity perhaps, because of the owner's interest. This study has contributed to the body of literature that has to do with media ethics in news reporting and media ownership. However, based on the limitations, we suggest that future research should consider looking at this issue from the perspective of media owners. Also, studies of this nature should consider other factors that may likely affect news objectivity other than media owners.

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