

BREACH OF MEDIA ETHICS AND THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS:

An Appraisal of Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation

UMOREN, Philomena Effiong
UKPONG, EdikanNseobong
Department of Mass Communication,
Akwa Ibom State University
Correspondence email: edikanukpong06@gmail.com
philoumoren12@gmail.com

Abstract

This study was carried out to examine the areas in which media ethics were breached during the 2019 presidential elections, the extents to which these breaches were visible and ways unethical and unprofessional conduct in the media can be stopped, especially during elections. This study used a descriptive survey design. Using the Meyer's statistical guide for sample size, 382 respondents were drawn out for the study from the total population of 373,929. Using the multistage sampling technique, the researchers administered copies of the questionnaires on the respondents. This study found that there was a high record (48%) of unethical and unprofessional conduct in the media during the 2019 presidential elections. Among the factors that cause these unethical conducts were: ownership influence (30%), poor remuneration (30%), greed (16%), and pressure (10%). The researchers, therefore, recommend that employers should set up a benchmark for journalists' welfare package and other remunerations such as a fix salary scale, housing loan/ grants, medical welfare for journalists.

Keywords: Ethics, media, politics, journalist welfare, elections

Introduction

All-round the world, journalists are obligated to certain expectations and moral obligations because of the pivotal role they play in society – media have become as necessary as clothes and food these days. They have also played significant roles in strengthening society. The media are concerned as “the mirror” of modern society. Being the watchdogs or gatekeepers of society, because they decide what news is and make many important decisions about what society says to itself. Journalism is guided by certain code of ethics. This is to ensure that journalists perform their job within the context of acceptable set of values and norms on which society thrives (ProjectClue, 2019). Media in Nigeria, as well, is generally governed by the same laws and ethics. As such, all media professionals (journalists) in the country are guided by the same code of practice.

After the press was granted freedom, it became expedient for journalists to conduct themselves in a manner that presented them as accountable, credible, reliable and worthy of society's trust. The media were from thence taken to be for the people and society. At such, the task of the press was to make a code of conduct and follow it, to develop a standard in

journalism, to make journalism better, to protect journalists from themselves and from the government and to have penalties if any journalist violates the code of conduct (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014; Ethical Journalism Network (n.d.); Collins, 2002). This way, the facts provided by the media are analysed and interpreted so that the people it serves get true and credible information and understandable news (Bajracharya, 2018; ProjectClue, 2019).

The media do not only analyse and interpret information so that the people it serves get true and credible information and understandable news; the media perform other very important roles in society such as: to inform people about current news affairs and tell them about the latest gossips and fashion; it can change opinion because it has access to the people and this gives it a lot of strength. This strength can either be used constructively by educating the people or it can be used destructively by misleading the innocent people. Considering these vital roles of the media, there is, therefore, a need for ethical issues to be critically considered especially during elections.

A general examination indicates that although Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation was not sanctioned by the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) for breach of media ethics that it seems to operate and practice outside the bounds of the journalistic code of ethics during the 2019 presidential elections. Thus, some of the activities carried out by the station during the elections were observed as clear breach of media ethics. These activities such as writing articles and stories to express their sentiment and inclinations to the party in power; airing foul and strong languages; inappropriate allocation of air time among political parties among others. Thus, this study seeks to assess whether Akwa Ibom Broadcasting critically considered and observed ethical standards in their political reportage during the 2019 presidential elections.

The Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation, with the popular acronym AKBC, was established by Edict No. 4 of April 1988 (NBC webpage, 2016; Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation, "About" page). AKBC, which provides both Radio and Television Services in Akwa Ibom, is christened, Voice of Promise. It was officially commissioned on July 27, 1991, by the Military Governor of the State, Idongesit Nkanga (then a Commander), transmitting on the frequency modulation of 90.528MHZ. Culling from the About page of the Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation website, the radio station christened, Radio Akwa Ibom, The Voice of Promise, transmits on the frequency 90.5FM with the vision of becoming a one-stop station for the best in entertainment, news and programmes that creatively galvanize Akwa Ibom people and positively project the rich cultural heritage, cherished values and potentials of the State for enhanced image and respectability within and outside Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

There seems to be a persistent betrayal of freedom of the media in many African countries including Nigeria (Chiyamwaka, 2008). According to Chiyamwaka (2008, p.4), opines that these betrayals including the freedom of expression and the public right to freely receive and impart information and opinion that ultimately hinders professionalism. Chiyamwaka observed thus:

The chief of this betrayal is the one upheld by journalists themselves with the adage: "Who eats ethics?" This is an operating maxim that guides some media

practitioners, especially during the election period. It is the motto of the antithetical media profession that operates in the opposite direction to media ethics. Journalists who adhere to this adage, against all forms of ethical codes and clear conscious guiding the performance of theirs, succumb to various pressures ranging from poor remuneration packages, ambush managers, tight lips, political pressure, commercialism and ownership. They give in to the brown envelope syndrome at the detriment of fairness, objectivity and accurate reportage. This negligence of a professional code of ethics becomes rampant during the critical period of elections when ethical and professional conduct of media professionals become crucial for fair and peaceful general elections (p.4).

This study assumes that if there are such betrayals still persist in the media in Akwa Ibom state, then they should be brought to the fore of scholastic debate and dealt with immediately. Therefore, this study seeks to look carefully and empirically into this matter. The study poses the following questions: what were the areas of these breaches of media ethics in the 2019 presidential elections, to what extent were the breaches visible, and how can unethical and unprofessional conduct in the media be stopped, especially during elections?

Media Ethics

According to Ekpoudom (2009, p.26 as cited in Asemah, 2011a), ethics is derived from the Greek word, *Ethos* and Latin word *Moralia* which means customs, habits, conduct, norms or accepted ways of behaviour. He goes on to postulate that ethics “studies human actions in terms of their being right or wrong, good or evil.” Also, Ozumba (2008, p.16, as cited in Asemah, 2011a) avers that ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with what is morally good or bad. For him, ethics is focused with the judgment of rightness or wrongness, virtuous or vicious, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval of human actions. He is also of the opinion that ethics as a philosophical ladder is concerned in attaining the good life which can be auspicious and congenial to the enhancement of a virtuous religious life.

In corroboration to this, Ekpoudom (2009, p.27, as cited in Asemah, 2011a) asserts that ethics is concerned with the good life as it focuses on how man ought to live a good life, thereby, teaching a man how to live aright, for only by living can happiness be achieved. Furthermore, Etuk (2006, p.6, as cited in Asemah, 2011a) opines that ethics is concerned with the determination of right conduct; studying the fundamental principles of morality; enquiring into theories of what is good or evil, right or wrong; as well as raising questions about the morality of human conduct and entails the question of the purpose, end and goal of human existence. However, we can aver here that ethics is the judgement and evaluation of right and wrong actions and conducts as it relates to the co-existence of human beings in society.

Without much ado, media ethics may be described as moral principles that guide media men in their professional conduct. They are normative ethics that prescribe the dos and don'ts of media practice. According to Baran (1999, as cited in Asemah (2011a, p.375), media ethics specifically refers to the application of rational thought by media professionals when deciding on what should be the right or best answer to a challenging professional problem.

Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility theory of mass media was designed formally by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. It is relatively a new concept which started in the mid-20th century and is used mostly by developing and least developed countries. Asemah (2011b) contends that The Social Responsibility Theory is an offshoot of the Libertarian theory. The theory emerged because the press abused the freedom, which they enjoyed as a result of the free press. However, the theory started in Europe and took a shape with the Commission on the Freedom of Press that happened in the United States in 1949 (Bajracharya, 2018).

This theory encourages total freedom to press and no censorship, but it proposes that the free press should be regulated according to social responsibilities and external controls. Thus, the content of the press is filtered through public obligation and interference. A major quote of the proponents, according to Bajracharya (2018), to show the essence of this theory reads thus: "freedom of expression under the social responsibility theory is not an absolute right, as under pure libertarian theory. One's right to free expression must be balanced against the private rights of others and against vital society interest."

This theory relates to this study as it proposes that media should be regulated with code of conducts to ensure that it operates in a way that is in line with the ideal moral values of the context within which it operates.

General Unethical Practices in the Mass Media

Unethical media practice simply means a situation in which a journalist does not practice either according to the media ethics, press laws or NBC codes. However, unethical practices in journalism do not exist in isolation, but as part of the overall ethical issues and societal problems in the world (Peple, & Acholonu, 2018). Mass Communication is a social process and the mass media works in conjunction with other social institutions that make up the social system (Sage Publications, 2019; Hjarvard, 2008). According to (Hjarvard, 2008, p.105), this is because, "Contemporary society is permeated by the media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and other social institutions". Thus, it will be meaningless discussing an institution such as Mass Communication as though it operates in isolation unconnected to other social processes. Every society has its moral problems, and a journalist is a member of the society. The type of society which the person comes from or in which he operates determines the individual's behaviour.

The Nigerian society, for instance, is filled with all sorts of ethical and social maladies that have defied all cures over the years. Most of these problems are in one way or another related to the all-encompassing problem of materialism. What journalists write inevitably touches other people's lives, and that information can ruin lives just as it can mend them. Consequently, no other profession is neither obsessed with ethics nor so roundly condemned for its transgressions (Kant, 1959).

People in different parts of the world are becoming increasingly vocal in their condemnation of the transgressions of the press, which, as an institution, is becoming more and more powerful with the increasing sophistication of new information technologies. Despite the introduction of a code of ethics for Nigerian journalists and the setting up of the Nigerian Press Council, however, there are other ethical issues which are part of the overall problem in the society. These include: sycophancy, character assassination, pressure,

Afghanistan, bribery, moonlighting, sensationalism, self-censorship, deception, freebies and junket journalism, brown envelopes, faking stories; and, hacking.

Electoral Act 2010 and Ethical Provision for Media during the 2019 Presidential Elections

Section 100, sub-section (1) of the Electoral Act 2010 provides that “a candidate and his party shall campaign for the elections in accordance with such rules and regulations as may be determined by the Commission”. Sub-section (2) provides that apparatus owned by the state including the media shall not be employed to the advantage or disadvantage of any political party or candidate at any election.

Sub-section (3) urged the media to equally allocate its time among political parties or candidates at similar hours of the day. Sub-sections (4), and (5) provided specific details as regarding the allocation of time and space on the media, respectively, thus: “At any public electronic media, equal airtime shall be allotted to all political parties or candidates during prime times at similar hours each day, subject to the payment of appropriate fees. At any public print media, equal coverage shall be allotted to all political parties.

Sub-section (6) provides the penalty to any public media that contravenes subsections (3) and (4) of this section. It asserts that so doing is an offence and is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of N 500,000 in the first instance and to a maximum fine of N1,000,000 for a subsequent conviction.

Section 101, sub-section (1) provides that a person, print or electronic medium that broadcasts, publishes, advertises or circulates any material for the purpose of promoting or opposing a particular political party or the election of a particular candidate over the radio, television, newspaper, magazine, handbill, or any print or electronic media whatsoever called during 24 hours immediately preceding or on polling day commits an offence under this Act.

Section 102 condemns the use of religious or ethnic groups for the campaign. It states that “a candidate, person or association who engages in campaigning or broadcasting based on the religious, tribal or sectional reason for the purpose of promoting or opposing a particular political party or the election of a particular candidate, commits an offence under this Act and is liable on conviction to a maximum fine of ₦ 1,000,000 or imprisonment for a term of 12 months or to both.

Breach of Media Ethics during the 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) sanctioned 45 broadcast stations, including NTA, AIT, Channels and TVC News, for alleged ethical infractions in relation to the 2019 presidential elections. The Director-General of the commission, Malam Is'HaqModibbo, made this disclosure at one of the news conferences in Abuja during the period of the elections. Kawu said the erring stations, which cut across the country, violated provisions of the Nigerian Broadcasting Code and were fined N 500,000 each (Sahara Reporters, 2019; Punch newspaper (online edition), 2019).

The reasons for sanction were all connected to breach of media ethics during the elections. The sanctioned stations allowed politicians to utter abusive, inciting and provocative statements during rallies. This happened on several radios and television stations, particularly and unfortunately on the big nation network such as NTA, AIT,

Channels, TVC News. Also, there were several radio and TV stations involved in this various infraction (Sahara Reporters, 2019; Punch newspaper (online edition), 2019).

The following are the areas where the affected stations breached media ethics that provided reasons for NBC to sanction them: partisan comments in phone-in programmes less than 24 hours to the election, use of campaign headlines on newspaper review, use of partisan SMS and endorsement of candidates, display of party logo and partisan social media content, partisan political broadcast, use of political campaign jingle and campaign message in news, political jingle less 24 hours to the elections, use of campaign really in news, the illegal announcement of election results by a caller in a phone-in programme, broadcast of political personalities with attires bearing party symbols and identification, use of hate speech at a live political rally; and, use of party logo less than 24 hours to elections (Sahara Reporters, 2019).

Reasons Journalists Carry Out Unethical Practices

So many reasons have been discovered to be responsible for unethical practices. As identified by Asemah (2011, p.402), some of the reasons are:

- **Pressure:** This entails any force or influence which makes a journalist feel strongly compelled to act in a manner desirable to the source of such force or influence. It is worthy to note that pressure could be internally that is, it emanates within the journalist's place of work or externally that is, it originates from the journalist's work environments. Pressure may cause a journalist to be irresponsible and unethical if the source compels him to carry out actions that are contrary to the journalistic ethical principle. For example, most journalists often carry out the wishes of their employers because of the fear of being punished physically or otherwise.
- **Poor remuneration:** The journalist who is not well paid is likely to be unethical. He might be tempted to collect brown envelopes due to his family's financial obligations.
- **Greed:** No matter the amount of money a greedy man has, he will not be satisfied. So, as a result of greed, most journalists go against the ethics of journalism. This also can be manifested in the collection of brown envelopes, free gifts, etc, by the journalist.
- **Expectations from society:** The society expects certain things from people once they are working; such expectations are houses, cars, good dresses, etc. in order to meet up with these expectations, the journalists go against the ethics of the profession.

Other reasons why journalists breach codes of ethics of journalism profession include: lack of principle, clash of interest, and knowledge of the power of the press among other factors.

Review of Empirical Studies

The axiom that no study exists in isolation is true. Various studies on media ethics have been carried prior to this study. Pepple and Acholonu in 2018 carried out a study entitled, "Media Ethics as Key to Sound Professionalism in Nigerian Journalism Practice". The study was to

examine the implications of ethics as key to sound professionalism in Nigerian journalism. They set out to assess how ethics affect the standard of journalism practice in the country, using media practitioners in Rivers State, Nigeria as case study. Their population of the 300 registered journalists in Rivers State of Nigeria, including the editors and managers. They revealed that despite the importance of ethics to journalism practice, journalists' adherences to the ethical codes were low. According to Pepple and Acholonu (2018, p.56), "journalists most times go against the ethics of the profession due to sycophancy, security reasons, desperation, greed, ethical dilemmas, and ignorance of the code of ethics".

Based on the findings of the study, they recommended that media establishments should liaise with the Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) to ensure that only trained journalists are employed to work as journalists. Again the NUJ, it should institute standing disciplinary committee to discipline erring journalists both at the State and National levels. The Ethics Committee of the Nigeria Union of Journalists should regularly review the ethical conducts of journalists and encourage them to adhere to their code of practice.

Also, Nasidi carried out a similar study in 2016 on "Media and ethics: journalism ethics in Nigerian news media" to explore the Journalism ethics in Nigerian news media. He used the discourse analysis as yardstick. His major finding revealed that "Nigerian journalists do not obey the codes; journalists are expecting to be moral-crusaders but some time they are doing otherwise" (p.5). The research exposed that the reason behind this is the complex nature of the Nigerian state. Oso (2007, as cited in Nasidi 2016) highlights the following as factors that can lead to unethical practices in Nigeria are: poor technical knowledge, conflict of interests, ownership pattern and control, pressure of the market, poor pay, weak professional regulation, and loose organizational policies and control.

In addition, a similar study appears on the Ghana media space too. Tuurosong and Faisal (2014) carried out a study entitled, "Ethical violations in press coverage of 2012 elections", to analyse the content of political stories which appeared in newspapers during the most serious campaign season from 1st November to 6th December, 2012. It was meant to investigate the extent and nature of ethical violations, the nature of coverage accorded political stories and the amount of news-hole devoted to the various political parties. The study found that newspapers routinely violated Article 1 of the GJA Code on balanced and fair coverage since they often published allegations made by one political party against another without first obtaining a response from the accused party.

Methodology

The survey research design was selected for this study. The population of this study was made-up of the residents of Uyo metropolis; which, according to the 2012 projected population in Directorate of Statistics, (2013, p.2) was 373,929 in number. Three hundred and eighty-four (384) respondents were selected as sample for the study using Meyer's statistical guide for sample size. The multi-stage sampling technique was used to select participants for the study for the study. Uyo was divided into groups using the major roads/streets in the metropolis as clutters. Data for this study were collected personally by the researcher using a structured questionnaire. The process took the researcher one week to go round the various prominent streets and locations within Uyo metropolis to distribute the questionnaire. Data collected through the questionnaire were analysed using simple percentage and the frequency distribution table.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The focus of this research was on Breach of Media Ethics and the 2019 Presidential Elections: An Appraisal of Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation. To obtain data for the study, 384 copies of the questionnaire were administered on the sample of the study. The researchers had a 100% return and validity rate because they administered the questionnaires personally and painstakingly guided respondents throughout the process. Data were analysed using percentage and table distribution.

Table 1: Respondents Awareness and Perception towards the breach of media ethics by AKBC during the 2019 presidential elections

S/N	Options	Responses	Freq.	Per cent
1.	To what extent do you think AKBC was ethical in the performance of their duties during the 2019 presidential election?	Very Large Extent	23	6
		Large Extent	44	11
		Unethical	184	48
		Little Extent	56	15
		Very Little Extent	77	20
		Total	384	100
2.	What were the areas you noticed the unethical performance of journalistic duties by AKBC during the 2019 presidential elections?	Partisan comments in phone -in programmes less than 24 hours to the election	75	20
		illegal announcement of election results by a caller in a phone -in programme	57	15
		Use of campaign really in the news	33	9
		Broadcast of political personalities with attires bearing party symbols and identification	54	14
		Use of hate speech at a live political rally	64	17
		Display of party logo and partisan social media content	60	16
		Endorsement of candidates	41	11
		Total	384	100
3.	What do you think made AKBC journalists carry out unethical and unprofessional conduct during the 2019 presidential elections?	Pressure	38	10
		Poor remuneration	97	25
		Greed	63	16
		Expectations from society	13	3
		Lack of principle	29	6
		Clash of interest	20	5
		Ownership influence	116	30
		Knowledge of the power of the press	18	5
		Total	384	100
4.	What, in your opinion, should be done to reduce the level of unethical and unprofessional conduct in AKBC especially during elections	Structured welfare package for journalists	135	35
		Less interference in media activities by media owners	150	39
		The sanction for defaulters of ethical code of conducts	99	26
		Total	384	100

(Source: Field Survey, 2019)

The table above addresses the four basic questions used by the researchers to access the breach of media ethics on AKBC, the state owned broadcasting station of Akwa Ibom state. First, the table considered the extent of ethical performance of AKBC during the 2019 presidential elections. Almost half of the respondents (48%) opined that the station was unethical in its performance during the elections. This goes against 6% of the respondents who said that station was ethical to a very large extent.

Secondly, the table reveals that there were more partisan comments on the station (20%) than other areas of ethical breaches such as illegal announcement of election results by a caller in a phone-in programme (15%), use of campaign rally in the news (9%), broadcast of political personalities with attires bearing party symbols and identification (14%), use of hate speech at a live political rally (17%), display of party logo and partisan social media content (16%), and endorsement of candidates (11%). So, hate speeches rate the second area of media bias with 17% of the respondents affirming.

On the factors harnessing unethical practices, the majority of the respondents (30%) opined that the government who own and manage AKBC influenced it greatly. This means, the government being the incumbent political party in power in the state dominated the media. Lastly, a great number of the respondents (39%) suggested that less inference in media activities by the political power in government during election periods will go a long way to help the state-own station to be more ethical in subsequent elections.

Discussion of Findings

From the table above, this study found out that AKBC was unethical in the performance of their duties during the 2019 presidential election. Forty-eight per cent (48%) of the respondents opined that the station was unethical. This finding is similar to the findings of Pepple and Acholonu in 2018, Nasidi in 2016 as well as Tuurosong and Faisal in 2014. With this consistency in finding, it is simple to assume that the issue of unethical practices in the media is persistent. This problem cuts across nations and continents. At such, something should be done to handle this menace bugging our media space as suggested earlier on in the statement of the problem. Nasidi (2016) clearly puts it that Nigerian journalists do not obey the codes. He said that even though they are expected to be moral-crusaders but they, some time, do not adhere to codes of conduct and ethics.

From our data analysis, the study also found out that partisan comments in phone-in programmes less than 24 hours to the election (20%); and, use of hate speech at a live political rally (17%) were the most common violations of the ethical provision of the Electoral Act 2010 which guided the elections. Based on the findings here, the report by “Sahara Reporters, 2019” as culled and documented under the heading “Breach of Media Ethics during the 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria” is to a greater extent upheld to be genuine as it agrees with the present finding of this study. According the Sahara Reporters (2019), NBC sanctioned broadcast media for a couple of media bridges including partisan comment on programmes. Partisan comment refers to comment that promotes a political party, figure or ideology openly (Merriam Webster dictionary, online edition). It is used for political comments that strongly support a party's policies and are reluctant to compromise with their political opponents (Wikipedia.com).

Further, this study discovered that ownership influence on media activities played a

vital role in promoting the aforementioned unethical conduct of the media. Being a state-owned media, the government of the day greatly influenced the activities of the media house in its favour. On the other hand, poor remuneration was held as another basis for unethical behaviour among journalists in AKBC. These findings give credence to that of Asemah (2011, p.402), which he opined that, so many reasons have been discovered to be responsible for unethical practices and these are: ownership influence, greed, pressure, poor remuneration among others. More so, it affirms this claim by IPDC (2015) that journalists sometimes compromised by betrayals from associated staff, which could expose journalists to kidnapping and consequential ransom demands. According to Pepple and Acholonu (2018, p.56), “journalists most times go against the ethics of the profession due to sycophancy, security reasons, desperation, greed, ethical dilemmas, and ignorance of the code of ethics”.

Finally, the study found out that lesser government interference on the media activities of government owned-media (39%) will help in curbing unethical practices by government-owned media such as AKBC. Following closely after is the assertion that having a well structured welfare package for journalists (35%) will also go a long way to minimise the rate of unethical practices especially those practices that are related to wellbeing such as collecting brown envelopes and unsolicited gift and appreciations which affects objectivity and accuracy in news reportage.

Conclusion

It is clear for the analysis of data collected that there is a persistent evidence of breach of media ethics in the activities of AKBC during the 2019 presidential elections. Relevant sources were consulted with the purpose of getting accurate information, and to get acquainted with some of the works already done in the area by different people. The review of empirical studies shows that these issues of breaches of media ethics are not peculiar to Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation or Nigeria alone. It showed that there are cases of violation of ethics even in other African countries such as Ghana. These previous studies agree with the findings of our study that there is a significant evident of the violations of media code of ethics.

To salvage the situation, this study as well as the study before it, has suggested measure to be taken to minimize the level of violation of media ethics affecting our media sphere locally, nationally and as a continent. A few of the suggestions include structured welfare package for journalists, less interference in media activities by media owners, the sanction for defaulters of ethical code of conducts among others. Although it shares great similarity with previous studies in terms of findings, theoretical frameworks and methodology, this study was unique in its scope. It was delimited to AKBC. The context scope was built around the sanction of various stations in Nigeria by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC)

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are important:

- i. The employers of journalists should ensure that remuneration for journalists is commensurate with the work they do. That is, there should be salary scale, housing loan/ grants, medical welfare for journalists.

- ii. Owners of media organizations should allow journalists to perform their duties according to the ethics of the profession.
- iii. Journalists should also follow the laid down laws and ethics of the profession and use them as a guideline in their day to day activities. They should always have it in mind that they serve as a bridge between the government and the public.
- iv. The government should reduce the level of influence they exert on the media especially during elections.

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