

## **HABERMAS' DISCOURSE ETHICS AND NIGERIAN JOURNALISM: EXPLORING TRUTH-TELLING, PRESS FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBLE REPORTING IN NIGERIA'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

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### **Abstract**

The paper discusses the ways discourse ethics applied by Juergen Habermas can be used to solve the modern problems in Nigerian journalism with reference to how the principles of communicative action, ideal speech situation and the public sphere can be used to address pressing needs in the media environment in Nigeria. As Nigeria is on the 112th position among the 180 countries on the scorecard of 2024 World Press Freedom Index, reporters are particularly concerned with such a serious challenge as government intimidation, economic pressure, and misinformation. Through the Habermasian discourse ethics, the paper evaluates how rational discourse principles, claims of universal validity, and communicative rationality can be used to transform the Nigerian media to become more responsible in their reporting. As the analysis indicates, despite Nigeria having certain elements of the media environment that portrays the Habermas idea of the public sphere, structural variations, economic conditions, and political interferences destroy the possibilities of having ideal speech situations. The paper will end with an elaboration of the recommendation of discourse principle of ethics to be used to promote the integrity of journalism, enhance press freedom, and build democratic discourse in the emerging media trend in Nigeria.

Keywords Discourse Ethics, Nigerian Journalism, Habermas, Public Sphere, Press Freedom, Media Ethics, Communicative Action.

### **Introduction: Nigeria's Media Landscape and Democratic Discourse**

The media environment in Nigeria poses a complicated landscape that consists of a strong journalistic culture on one hand and giant structural obstacles to discourse liberty and press freedom on the other. Nigeria is the most populated democracy in Africa, and therefore, the media system in the nation has the extremely significant responsibilities to influence the opinion of the people, provide an opportunity to take part in democracy, and guarantee the accountability of power. However, bad omen signs undermine the democratic role of the media. In its 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has placed Nigeria at position 112 among 180 countries in terms of press freedom, which security agencies are associated with 65% of reported attacks on

journalists in 2024 (Blueprint Newspapers, 2025).

All these issues are coupled with the dynamically evolving media landscape of Nigeria with more than 80 digital news producers undermining the traditional media and an emerging social media as the news source (Adeyemo, 2024). The integration of technological revolution and historical systemic issues of practice such as financial needs and restrictions, security threats to journalists put fundamental questions of media responsibility and ethical behavior under the microscope.

Jurgen Habermas has created discourse ethics which are helpful in examining and resolving these problems. Developed as important subsections of his own communicative action theory, discourse ethics provides normative principles of communication practice measurement and evaluation concerning their democratic functions (Habermas, 1990). The rational discourse and truth-seeking orientation of the theory and the circumstances in which legitimate agreement can be achieved relate to key journalistic values and practices.

The potential of discourse ethics to shed light on the ways ahead of the Nigerian journalism industry is discussed by the paper in the form of three primary research questions, and they are: (1) How do current practices within the Nigerian journalism industry adhere or do not adhere to the principles of communicative action as proposed by Habermas? (2) What are some of the structural factors about the Nigeria media environment that predefine the failure to bring optimal speech situations to life? (3) What can discourse ethics principles accomplish in strengthening reforms to enhance press freedom and journalistic responsibility in Nigeria?

## **Habermasian Discourse Ethics: Philosophical Foundations**

### **Foundations of Discourse Ethics**

Discourse ethics introduced by Juergen Habermas is a revised version of the moral thinking premised on pragmatic assumptions of communicative action. In contrast to classical deontological or consequentialist, discourse ethics has its basis of moral legitimacy in the modes of rational argumentation (Habermas, 1990). The theory is grounded on two concepts, the Discourse Principle (D) and the Universalization Principle (U).

The Discourse Principle dictates that those norms can only be valid when they are in line to the approval of all the parties concerned in their ability to participate in a practical discourse (Habermas, 1996, p. 107). Universalization Principle states that standardized norms become valid when all the interested and concerned can mutual accommodate the foreseeable consequences and side effects of general observance of their interests and value-orientations without coercion (Habermas, 1990, p. 93).

These standards establish procedural criteria of moral justification that emphasize the inclusion of every group of people, rational thinking, and agreement formation via the strength of arguments and not coercion or manipulation (Finlayson and Rees, 2023). In the case of journalism, these principles provide normative methods of evaluation of reporting, editorial decisions, and media input to democratic discourse.

### **The Ideal Speech Situation and Journalistic Practice**

The principal aspect of the framework that Habermas has developed is the notion of ideal

speech situation as the epitome of the rational conversation conditions. There should be no pressure on the participants, and they should have equal opportunities to communicate, dispute the statements, suggest topics, and express attitudes (Wikipedia, 2024). This ideal, though never entirely practical, gives regulatory principles of judging the actual communicative practices.

In the case of journalism, the ideal deal of speech presupposes a number of normative requirements: news coverage should contain quality and decipherable information; various opinions should reach media; journalists should not be pressured by external influences; the audiences should be allowed to respond and participate in mediated speech (Christians et al., 2016). These values are in tandem with traditional journalistic values of accuracy, fairness, independence, accountability and provide rational philosophical foundations of such values.

### **The Public Sphere and Democratic Media**

The democracy of journalism is relevant here because it is related to the concept of the public sphere as formulated by Habermas the social life sphere in which public opinion is created by way of rational-critical discourse (Habermas, 1991, p. 398). In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas discussed the historical evolution of the bourgeois public spheres in 18<sup>th</sup> -century Europe when coffee houses, newspapers, and literary journals offered the platform to discuss the social events in the critical manner (Journalism University, 2024).

The presence of media in the constitution and maintenance of the publics makes journalists important actors in the discourses that are democratic. Nevertheless, Habermas also authored a piece where he discussed the processes of commercialization and mass media that killed the critical role of the public sphere and replaced the rational dialogue with the spectacle and manipulation (Mwengenmeir, 2014). The discussion provides useful insights towards the understanding of the modern Nigerian journalism problems.

## **Philosophical Analysis of Nigerian Media Practices**

### **Communicative Action versus Strategic Action**

Habermas distinguishes between communicative action that aims at understanding and reaching a consensus and strategic action that aims at satisfying personal or organizational objectives by means of influence or manipulation (Cherem, 2024). This distinction organizes tests of journalism practices in Nigeria.

Factors show that there are enormous challenges that support communicative action orientation. Economic pressures make several media houses to value the interests of the advertisers more than the information requirements of the people. Self-censorship and undermined reporting are caused by editorial pressure of government officials and business leaders on the basis of their advertising revenue control (RSF, 2024). Cash-for-coverage phenomena- cash payment to journalists in order to get a good coverage is a strategic manipulation that is contrary to communicative action.

However, the media situation in Nigeria is not an exception as it is also the case of following the principles of communicative action. In spite of harassment and legal challenges, notable cases of corruption and rule by the rule of law have been published in

investigative journalism organisations such as Premium Times, Foundation of Investigative Journalism and The Cable. Their work is a good example of the role of journalism in helping the rational people talk by giving them the right information to act democratically.

### **Validity Claim and Truth-Telling**

Discourse ethics proposes three universal claims of validity to communicative action, which include truth (consistency with objective facts), rightness (belief to social norms), and sincerity (true expression of speaker intentions) (University of Regina, 2018). Such claims give the criteria on how to assess the journalistic communication.

Nigeria journalism is confronted by significant challenges of truth claims. Online platforms promote the propagation of misinformation and disinformation, and some traditional media outlets published unregulated information so as not to lag behind social media. However, the presence of truth-seeking commitments is implied in such fact-checking initiatives as Dubawa and investigative departments of large newspapers. Customized news featuring on websites such as Legit.ng through the use of artificial intelligence systems is a new approach to information verification (Adeyemo, 2024).

The issues with the rightness claims are the cases when professional ethics are in opposition to cultural/political expectations. Ethical standards of Nigerian Union of Journalists are biased towards accuracy, fairness and independence that are poorly enforced. This nature of limited mandate of the Nigerian Press Council to handle professional misconduct is one of the institutional issues about upholding of the ethical principle (Blueprint Newspapers, 2025).

The truthfulness claims are compromised by economic considerations into editorial practice or even intimidation of the press which promotes self censorship. Nevertheless, there are also numerous Nigerian reporters who are not going to give in to their calling despite their own life at stake and still write on delicate topics using investigative journalism.

### **Inclusion and Equal Participation**

Discourse ethics requires every interested party to be given equal opportunities to engage in rational discourse. The inclusion of Nigerian journalism is an indication of certain improvement and ongoing limitations. Even though media outlets are becoming more inclusive in terms of the voices and opinions, the structural limitations prevent any meaningful engagement.

The journalism in Nigeria has become gender friendly as women occupy top ranks in major media outlets. Nevertheless, rural inhabitants, ethnic minorities, and poor people still do not find their way to mainstream media discourse. The language barrier also worsens the situation with inclusive communication since Nigeria is home to more than 250 dialects (Media Landscapes, 2019).

Digital platforms offer additional interaction sources, but digital inequalities do not allow everyone to use digital platforms. The lack of online discourse arenas is due to the fact that most Nigerians do not have direct access to online discourses as the internet penetration level is 45.5 percent (Freedom House, 2024). This drawback especially affects the rural or low income population that replicates the current disparities in mediated public space.

### **Structural Obstacles to Ideal Speech Situation**

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the application of the concept of discourse ethics to Nigerian journalism lies in economic constraints. The vulnerability of the media industry to external forces and inability to be independent in editorial activities is caused by financial vulnerability. Cutting advertising revenues by the means of currency devaluation and inflation contribute to expenditure cuts restricting the possibilities of newsgathering and developing professionally (Adeyemo, 2024).

This financial drawback generates the distortion of communication that would be called systematic by Habermas. An editorial choice that is based on non-communicative rationality and strategic choices happens when the media companies rely too heavily on the advertisement or business interests of political leaders. This self-censorship and the selective report is wrong in the discourse ethics in terms of telling the truth where honesty is a required quality.

Another significant impediment to optimal speech is political interference in the activity of media. The asymmetry in the distribution of power based on the requirements of the licenses, the analysis of taxes and regulation leads to the destruction of rational discourse. The threatened withdrawal of the licenses of the stations by the National Broadcasting Commission over the failure to pay fees (banned by the federal court later) is the example of how regulatory mechanisms can be applied to the independent media (Oyedokun, 2024).

Criminal laws against the criticism of government officials and policies are used to distort the mass discourse and impose external restrictions on foreign communication. Even though the constitution of Nigeria ensures the freedom of expression, the provisions of penal code and cybercrime laws provide the government with the opportunity to limit the freedom of critical reporting (RSF, 2024).

The Nigerian society adheres to a hierarchy and respect to authority and it might not allow egalitarian discourse that the theory by Habermas requires. The deference given to older people, religious figures and political leaders in the past can create a challenging situation when it comes to challenging the authority, particularly in some regional and cultural backgrounds. These cultural pressures can discourage the urge of journalists to engage in investigative journalism and the willingness of the audience to engage in investigative coverage.

But this should not be overestimated. The culture of the democracy in Nigeria has evolved significantly since 1999 when citizens began participating more in political debate and continue to expect more accountability on the government. The social media has made it possible to communicate more directly with the citizens by bypassing the conventional hierarchies, but at the cost of introducing new issues of the quality of information and the civility of discussion.

### **Recommendations And Conclusions**

#### **Institutional Reforms**

Institutional changes are necessary in order to contribute to the execution of the discourse ethics concepts in the Nigerian journalism, and one of the aspects is the focus on the structural constraints to the desirable speech forms. The recommended economic independence actions involve the independent public interest journalism funding

independence-government-independent media development funds, nonprofit news organization funding, and various revenue actions that restrict the dependency on politically sensitive advertising. The popularity of the online-only platforms means that there are new forms of financing that may arise.

The enforcement of the professional standards entails further strengthening the Nigerian Press Council and the teaching institutions of journalism in order to be more stringent on the application of the ethical standards and provide support to the journalists who fear intimidation due to political or economic factors. This includes setting up of lifelong learning, legal assistance to journalists and career building.

The regulatory reform should revisit the laws and regulations that regulate the media with the view of eliminating the wording that can be used to censor or politicize without the need to uphold accuracy and decency levels in matters that should take place in populations. The law amendments proposed on the patterns of broadcasting law should be able to help the objectivity of press freedom, but at the same time should address the legality of hate speech and misinformation.

### **Participatory Journalism Models**

Discourse ethics that is based on the principles of inclusive participation implies the way of enhancing citizen involvement in journalism. The community engagement programs could be developed by Nigerian press by planned communication to communities about the news stories that were appreciated, the types of sources, and the feedback about the stories. This may be done by town meetings, web based meetings as well as integrated reporting programs.

The internet and digital literacy should be more accessible especially in rural regions through digital inclusion programs to ensure that more people will participate in mediated communal discourse. The advocacy of such efforts can be arranged with the participation of telecommunication service providers and government agencies. Multilingual content ought to have more localizations of local languages to ensure that language groups are more well-represented in discourse than just the elites who speak English languages.

### **Educational and Cultural Change**

To implement discourse ethics principles in the long term, it is necessary to make cultural changes to the nature and mission of journalism. The reformation of journalism education must incorporate the relevant discourse ethics concepts in journalism education to train the new journalism professionals to have the attributes of facilitative discourse professionals. These are conflict reporting training, fact-checking tools and approaches to community engagement.

The need of the public media literacy is holistic media literacy programs that allow citizens to make judgments about the quality of information, comprehend media economics, and be competent discourse users. This must involve fake information awareness and sufficient social media use programs. The concept of building professional journalism culture should focus on serving the community rather than making profits and offer those who practice ethically sustainable careers.

### **Challenges and Conclusion**

Habermas discourse ethics have been criticized in some ways which limit its direct application to the Nigerian journalism. Feminist critics claim that the theory also favors

the rational argumentation rather than the other forms of communication which may exclude the traditional storytelling and religious communication that are relevant in Nigerian culture (Benhabib, 2020). Cultural diversity in Nigeria renders generalist assumptions quite difficult to achieve because various ethnic and religious groups have different communicative norms.

There are practical barriers to implementation. Economic crises impair the ability to do extensive consultation and fact-checking which discourse ethics requires. Security threats such as insurgency and tribal conflicts threaten the reporters and intimidate them against serious reporting. The political situation in Nigeria is that the environment is indisposed to ideal speech situation in the short run due to ethnic tensions and poor institutions.

Nevertheless, in spite of these, discourse ethics offers useful principles in the reform of journalism in Nigeria. Results of the analysis show that the present obstacles such as economic pressures, political interference, and security threats present systematic distortions that do not allow ideal speech situations. Nonetheless, the persistence of the investigative reporting, digital innovation, and civil society mobilization show potential of improvement.

Among major conclusions made are as follows: structural reform imperative- economic and legislative reforms are necessary in making discourse ethics a reality in Nigeria; participatory potential- the multi-faceted nature of media in Nigeria and the growing digital interaction avenue means that by offering discourse as a service to the wider population, professional development is necessary that forms cultural norms that prioritize service to the larger community over political and commercial imperatives; professional development needs- the application of discourse ethics in journalism education can create a culture of cultural norms which focuses on service to the masses and not on political and commercial

The procedural standards of discourse ethics can be particularly useful in the situation of multi-dimensional democracy in Nigeria, as the agreement to fair communication processes can be more possible than the agreement to certain policies. As democratization takes place in Nigeria, with the frameworks provided by Habermas, it is possible to educate the systems of media that would aid in truth-seeking as well as democratic processes in Nigeria and use cultural diversity and developmental realities. Further studies are required on the applications of discourse ethics in various situations of Nigerian media and how digital technologies can support the inclusive and reasonable discourse of the people.

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