

THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF JOURNALISM, PROPAGANDA, AND THE DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

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Abstract: This paper examines the moral implications of journalism, propaganda, and the dissemination of information and explores the moral consequences that arise when the lines between truthful reporting and manipulation are blurred. Drawing on philosophical perspectives, including utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics, this research analyzes journalists' and media organizations' responsibilities in promoting truthfulness, accountability, and transparency globally, especially in Africa. The work argues that the dissemination of propaganda and biased or misleading information can have dire consequences, including the erosion of democracy, public manipulation and social division. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of ethical journalism in maintaining a well-informed society and promoting democratic values.

Keywords: Moral Implications, Journalism, Propaganda, Dissemination of Information, Social Divisions

INTRODUCTION

There is no gainsaying the fact that journalism has long been considered the backbone of every society. It has also been described as the “Fourth Estate”, serving as a watchdog that informs the public and holds those in power accountable. The dissemination of information through news media shapes public discourse, influences policymaking, and can even determine the course of history. However, globally, especially in Africa, the line between objective news creating, reporting (journalism) and propaganda is often blurred, raising serious moral concerns about the responsibilities of journalists and media organizations. Propaganda, by contrast, is designed to manipulate public perception, often prioritizing persuasion over factual accuracy. Throughout history, propaganda has been used as a tool by governments, corporations, and interest groups to shape narratives and maintain power. This raises profound ethical dilemmas: When does journalism cross the line into propaganda? What are the consequences of biased or misleadingly reporting? How should journalists navigate their moral responsibility in an era of increasing misinformation?

This paper explores the ethical implications of journalism and propaganda by drawing on philosophical perspectives to analyze the responsibilities of media professionals. This paper argues that journalism carries

immense moral weight and that the dissemination of biased or misleading information can have dire ethical consequences, including the erosion of democracy, public manipulation, and the fostering of social divisions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: JOURNALISM, PROPAGANDA, AND THE DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

In today's interconnected world, the ability to distinguish between journalism, propaganda, and the dissemination of information is becoming increasingly critical. Each of these concepts plays a significant role in shaping public perception, influencing political discourse, and informing decision-making. This framework explores their definitions, ethical considerations, and real-world examples to highlight their impact on society.

Journalism: Definition and Purpose

Just like every other discipline that holds different definitions as peculiar to their context, the concept of journalism is traditionally defined as the practice of gathering, verifying, and reporting news in the public interest. By this definition, it can be held that journalism is a discipline that seeks to create, assess, and present information to the public in an objective, accurate, and ethical manner. For Kovach and Rosenstiel, journalism is a "discipline of verification that seeks the truth through rigorous fact -checking, independence, and accountability" (2014, 9). In essence, journalism is a discipline grounded on the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, accountability, and independence. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel, "The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (2014, 12). This implies that the purpose of journalism or a journalist is to serve as a watchdog of power, ensuring transparency, and holding institutions accountable. The journalists work requires rigorous fact-checking, sourcing, and ethical responsibility to avoid bias or propaganda. An example is The Watergate Scandal of (1972-1974) as reported by Schudson (2011, 87); One of the most famous examples of investigative journalism is The Washington Post's coverage of the Watergate scandal. Journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered a political cover-up that led to the resignation of U.S. President Richard Nixon. Their reporting demonstrated the power of journalism in exposing corruption and reinforcing democratic accountability.

Propaganda: Definition and Intent

According to Randal Marlin, propaganda is the "organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or supplies an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment" (2013,12). Jowett and O'Donnell define journalism as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (2014, 9). For Ellul (1973, 112), propaganda refers to "a biased or misleading information disseminated to promote a particular political cause or ideology." Unlike journalism, which seeks objective truth, propaganda often distorts reality for persuasive ends."For Stanley (2015, 39), propaganda can be defined as a "politically motivated news that is directed to depress on citizen's engagement and genuine political participation."

From the above positions, propaganda can be seen as a form of information dissemination designed to influence public opinion, often by presenting selective, exaggerated, or false information. For Stanley also (cited in Odunlade, Ojo and Och, 2021, 36), "the goal of propaganda is to incite people to action and dampen information processing characterized by deliberation and reflection". While ethical journalism seeks objective truth, propaganda prioritizes persuasion over truth.

Propaganda can take various forms, including political messaging, advertising, and ideological indoctrination. Governments, corporations, and media entities commonly use it to promote specific narratives. **A modern example is Russian disinformation in the 2016 U.S. Election.** Rid succinctly put this case thus:

In recent years, propaganda has evolved through digital platforms. Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election involved coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media, using fake accounts and misleading content to influence voters. Reports by U.S. intelligence agencies confirmed that Russian operatives disseminated divisive political messages to undermine trust in democratic institutions (2020,110).

Dissemination of Information: Definition and Function

Unlike journalism and propaganda, which showcase specific intentions, information dissemination is a neutral concept that encompasses both informative and persuasive communication. Castells (cited in Onigbinde and Oloyede 2024, 96) explained that information dissemination has been transformed by digital networks, where “individuals and institutions engage in a complex interplay of producing, distributing, and consuming messages”. The dissemination of information refers to the broad process of distributing knowledge, news, or data across various channels, including print, digital, and broadcast media, to the public without necessarily adhering to journalistic or propagandistic standards. It encompasses government communications, academic research, corporate press releases, and social media sharing. While dissemination can contribute to informed societies, it can also facilitate misinformation when unchecked. Shannon and Weaver’s communication model outlines the key elements of effective information dissemination as follows:

1. *The sender is the originator of the message.*
2. *Message: content being communicated.*
3. *Channel: The medium used to transmit a message (e.g., newspapers, television, social media).*
4. *The receiver is the audience that consumes the information.*
5. *Noise: Any interference that distorts or misinterprets a message (1949, 19).*

COVID-19 Public Health Messaging (2020-2022) provides a case study, as provided by Gibson thus:

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of information dissemination. Governments, health organizations, and media outlets worked to inform the public about safety protocols, vaccinations, and misinformation. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) use multiple channels, including press briefings, social media, and fact-checking initiatives, to disseminate accurate health information (2022,45).

However, misinformation also spreads rapidly. Conspiracy theories about the virus, vaccine misinformation, and politically motivated narratives created an “infodemic,” making it difficult for the public to discern credible information from falsehoods. As observed by Udoh and Udo (2022,25), “in an article titled “Covid-19: A well planned Conspiracy” published April 18, 2020 Shivang Yadav and Rakshitt Bajpai edited by Gabriell Wast contains an alleged claim by a US interest group “Freedom Watch” against the Chinese Government in the pandemic”. This case underscores both the power and challenges of information dissemination in the digital era.

Philosophical Foundations of Ethics in Journalism

Amanda and Oyibo (2014,8) observed that, throughout the ages “philosophers and others have presented their ethical theories, which are meant both to capture and to correct our moral judgments”. However, the absence of universally agreed moral standards, as observed by Charimakes, makes ethics a hotly contested terrain. In his words;

Journalists working in different jurisdictions and cultural contexts often emphasize different values. For instance, a journalist in the United States of America may place more attention on individual freedom, whereas one in a developing country may feel duty bound to respect the collective interests of the community in which he or she lives (2009,47).

Hence, Christians (1983, 9) identifies five ethical principles that have historically been drawn upon for moral decision-making. These are:

- **Aristotle's Golden Mean:** This principle rests on the assumption that virtue lies between two extremes. Thus, a morally upright journalist is neither the one that is a coward nor bashful. Aristotle emphasizes moderation for the appropriate actions. "He investigated human nature to uncover how virtues are fundamental to human well-being." The contention is that living according to the virtues translates to living in tune with human nature" (Udo and Essiet 2024, 55). Aquinas further elaborated on this concept when he defines his theory of the middle ground: *virtue medio est*.
- **Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative:** "Act on that maxim by which you will become a universal law." "Kant contrived the phrase "categorical imperative" to clinch his thoughts on morality...categorical imperatives command in an absolute, non-conditional, unqualifiable and obligatory manner without reference to consequences or personal interest" (Udoфia and Udo 2018,59). This principle emphasizes that 'what is right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions.' If, for example, a journalist is convinced that publishing a particular story is the right thing, then he or she must go ahead and not mind the consequences.
- **The Mills Principle of Utility**, otherwise known as **Utilitarianism** according to Christians (2007, 113), has dominated media ethics for a century. This philosophical strand was predicted on the premise that man must 'seek greatest happiness for the greatest number.' In other words, what is right is that which pleases the greatest number of people in a nation. "It is therefore a form of social hedonism which postulates that we ought to act so as to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (Udoфia and Udo 2018, 56).Christians observe that this ethical view is widespread in American society.
- **John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance:** 'Justice in the view of Rawls emerges when negotiating without social differentiation.' This principle rests on Rawl's (1972) proposition that fairness is a fundamental tenet of justice. In a sense, justice is viewed as a 'cloistered virtue' that is blind to social status, gender or creed. All people must be treated fairly without fear or favor. Being morally upright should not be prerogative or treat the powerful in society as sacred cows. All creatures, great and small, should be subjected to the same moral standards. This is necessary because according to Udo and Essiet (2024, 54) "we generally admire and find ourselves attracted to people who display virtue." Corporate organizations and public institutions prefer to engage the services of people who embody the virtues that help promote their vision".
- **The Judeo-Christian perspective on Morality focuses on persons as ends:** The "love your neighbor as yourself" principle views all human beings as standing for one moral virtue. Love is viewed as more than a mere principle stemming from action and responsibility (Christians 1983, 16). Judeo-Christian humanity makes it immoral for any individual to use others for achieving selfish ends. Loving one's neighbor is a personal moral duty that goes beyond legal dictates. In this principle, the poor, orphans, widows, aliens, the disabled, and other disadvantaged groups are protected. This principle exhorts radical protections to maintain social welfare and opportunities in society (Chari 2009, 47).

The aforementioned five foundations provide insights into the ethical arguments between teleology, deontology, relativism, absolutism, universalism, subjectivism, objectivism, legalistic ethics and antinomian as guides for journalistic ethical decisions.

EXAMINING THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF JOURNALISM, PROPAGANDA AND THE DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

The dissemination of information through journalism, propaganda, and other forms of communication has significant moral implications. Jurgen Habermas argued, “the dissemination of information is a fundamental principle of democracy, because it provides individuals with the information they need to make informed decisions about their own lives” (1984, 56). In all of this, the moral questions are: What are the consequences of receiving inaccurate, misleading and fake information? What are the moral implications of misinforming the public? What are the consequences of not upholding the ethical principles of journalism? Is there a moral justification for propaganda considering objectivity, accuracy, and truthfulness? How can we reconcile moral dilemmas in information dissemination? What are the moral obligations of information disseminators? These and more salient questions form the philosophical exposition of this paper.

Moral Implications of Receiving Inaccurate, Misleading, and Fake Information

Receiving inaccurate, misleading, and fake information has profound moral consequences that affect both the individual, society, and the broader ethical framework of truth, objectivity, and knowledge. In this paper, the moral implications are examined through three ethical principles: deontological ethics, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. The principle provides different perspectives on the moral harm caused by misinformation.

1. Deontological Principle: The Duty to Seek and Uphold Truth

From a Kantian perspective, receiving false information corrupts the moral duty to pursue and uphold truth. Immanuel Kant asserts that truthfulness is a fundamental moral obligation, arguing that “to be truthful in all declarations is therefore a sacred command of reason” (1785, 22). Kant implies that if individuals accept and act upon false information, they unwittingly participate in a system of deception, violating their moral duty to reason and truth.

Furthermore, propaganda undermines the principle of autonomy, that is, individuals' ability to make informed decisions. Kantian ethics values autonomy as a cornerstone of moral action, and people who base their decisions on falsehoods are deprived of their capacity for rational self-determination. Thus, receiving misinformation is not merely an epistemic failure but a moral harm, as it prevents individuals from exercising their moral agency freely and rationally.

2. Consequential Principle: The Harm of Misinformed Decisions

From a utilitarian perspective, the moral consequences of misinformation are linked to the harm it causes. John Stuart Mill emphasized that a free and open exchange of ideas is essential for discovering the truth, stating that “the best way of arriving at truth is to allow free competition of ideas” (1859, 22). However, when false information is received and accepted, the competition is distorted, leading to poor decision-making and social harm.

For example, misinformation in public health, such as the spread of false claims about vaccines, can lead to disease outbreaks, preventable deaths, and a decline in trust in medical institutions. Similarly, political misinformation can lead to uninformed voting decisions, the erosion of democratic processes, and the manipulation of public opinion for unethical purposes. These consequences demonstrate that receiving false

information not only affects the individual but also causes widespread social harm, violating the utilitarian principle of maximizing well-being.

3. Virtue Ethics: The Corruption of Moral Character

Aristotle's virtue ethics considers moral character as central to an ethical life. He argued that truthfulness is a fundamental virtue, stating that "falsehood is in itself mean and culpable, and truth noble and praise" (2009, 1127a). When individuals repeatedly receive and act on false information, they risk developing intellectual and moral vices such as gullibility, cynicism, and dishonesty.

Moreover, propaganda fosters distrust in social institutions, weakening communal bonds and ethical discourse. When people become accustomed to falsehoods, they may either blindly accept propaganda or become skeptical of all information, leading to a breakdown in societal trust. This erosion of trust further damages the moral fabric of society as honest discourse and ethical decision-making become increasingly difficult.

Moral Implications of Misinforming the Public

From an ethical perspective, misinformation raises significant moral concerns within deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics frameworks. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative posits that truthfulness is a fundamental moral duty, arguing that "a lie always harms another; if not some human being, then it nevertheless does harm to humanity in general" (1785,15). By this reasoning, intentionally spreading false information violates the principle of universalizability because it undermines the very fabric of rational communication.

Utilitarian ethics, as articulated by John Stuart Mill, suggests that free discourse is essential for the pursuit of truth. Mill writes that "the best way of arriving at truth is to allow free competition of ideas" (1859,22). However, propaganda disrupts this competition by presenting falsehoods as facts, thereby reducing the overall utility of public discourse. In a democratic society, propaganda can lead to poor policy decisions and social harm, violating the utilitarian principle of maximizing well-being. A typical example is the 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria, where the whole fabric of false narratives, propaganda, and fake information were orchestrated on the personality of President Goodluck Jonathan, namely the Chibok girl's adoption, the non-remittance of crude oil proceeds to the CBN, the propaganda that the president was training snipers in South Korea and that there was a strategic plant dissipate the north. The conjectures that later resulted in President Jonathan being lost at the poll.

Furthermore, Aristotle's virtue ethics emphasized the moral character of individuals and institutions. He maintains that truthfulness is a virtue that fosters trust and social harmony. It is instructive for a media institution or journalist who engages in propaganda fails to cultivate the virtues necessary for a just society.

The Consequences of Not Upholding Journalism Ethics

The ethics of journalism emphasizes objectivity, accuracy, and truthfulness. When these standards are not upheld, the consequences are far-reaching. Stephen Ward identifies three major consequences for the following:

- (1) erosion of public trust in the media
- (2) increased social division, misinformation, and
- (3) Susceptibility to propaganda and authoritarian control (2011, 67).

Nietzsche critiques the fluidity of truth in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, arguing that when truth is sacrificed for power, media becomes an instrument of domination rather than enlightenment. He asserts that "truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions" (1999, 84). This disposition emphasizes the risks of

media manipulation, where information ceases to be a tool for enlightenment and instead becomes a means of control.

Michel Foucault further noted that knowledge production is linked to power dynamics. He argues, “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge” (1975, 27). The implication is that when journalistic ethics are ignored and abandoned, media institutions risk becoming instruments of power rather than sources of truth. The resultant effects are the spread of propaganda, the suppression of dissenting voices, and the reinforcement of systemic injustices.

Is There a Moral Justification for Propaganda considering Objectivity, Accuracy, and Truthfulness?

The morality of propaganda is highly contested in philosophical discourse. Plato, in *The Republic*, introduces the concept of a “noble lie,” suggesting that deception can be justified when it serves a greater good. He argues, “Falsehood is in itself evil and to be hated; but when it is useful as a remedy, it becomes useful” (1992, 414b). This perspective suggests that propaganda is permissible if it upholds social stability or national security. However, Kant’s deontological ethics rejects this notion outright. He maintains that all deceptions are morally impermissible because they violate the autonomy of individuals. Kant writes, “To be truthful in all declarations is therefore a sacred command of reason” (1785, 22). According to this logic, even well-intentioned propaganda is morally wrong because it manipulates people rather than respecting their rational agency.

A consequentialist approach might argue that certain forms of propaganda, such as public health campaigns, can be justified if they produce beneficial outcomes. For example, messages that exaggerate the dangers of smoking may be ethically acceptable if they reduce smoking rates and prevent disease. However, the challenge lies in distinguishing between propaganda that serves the public interest and that which serves political or corporate agendas.

Reconciling Moral Dilemmas in Information Dissemination

Moral dilemmas in the dissemination of information arise when principles of truth, harm prevention, and public interest conflict. Several philosophical approaches offer guidance for reconciling these tensions:

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Ward argued that media organizations must clearly differentiate between facts, opinions, and interpretations: “Ethical journalism requires a commitment to transparency, so audiences can distinguish verified information from speculation” (2011, 93).
- **Public Deliberation:** Habermas’ theory of communicative action suggests that open dialog fosters truth-seeking. He states, “Only those norms can claim validity that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected” (1984, 93). Encouraging public deliberation and critical media consumption can mitigate the effects of misinformation.
- **Media Literacy and Ethical Education:** McChesney argued that “a well-informed public is the best safeguard against media manipulation” (2013, 176). Promoting media literacy can empower individuals to critically evaluate sources and resist misinformation.
- **Regulatory Oversight:** While some regulations are necessary to prevent deliberate misinformation, excessive control risks censorship. Oreskes and Conway (2010, 210) suggest that “fact-checking mechanisms, rather than government control, can be an effective way to counter misinformation while preserving freedom of speech.”

By balancing these strategies, societies can navigate the ethical complexities of information dissemination while upholding democratic values.

Moral Obligations of Information Disseminators

Information disseminators; which include journalists, media organizations, and government officials, play a critical role in shaping public knowledge and discourse. Their roles extend beyond merely sharing information; they must ensure accuracy, fairness, and ethical integrity in their communication. Where such is lacking, call to question the moral obligations of information disseminators, which are said to be rooted in philosophical ethics, professional journalism standards and legal principles.

Accuracy and Truthfulness

One of the fundamental obligations of information disseminators is to ensure the accuracy and truthfulness of their content. The spread of propaganda and fake news can lead to public confusion, social unrest, and loss of trust in institutions.

J. S. Mill, in *On Liberty*, emphasized that “a well-informed society depends on the free exchange of truthful information and diverse perspectives” (1859, 12). Mill argued that the suppression of truth, even unintentionally undermines societal progress. Similarly, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics requires journalists to “take responsibility for the accuracy of their work” and ensure that their sources are credible (SPJ, 2014, 2).

Case studies demonstrate the consequences of failing to uphold accuracy. The 2016 U.S. presidential election was heavily influenced by the spread of misinformation on social media, leading to political polarization and voter manipulation (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, 212). This highlights the necessity for fact-checking and responsible reporting.

Fairness and Objectivity

As carriers of information, it is an obligation to avoid bias reporting to ensure that diverse perspectives are presented. Fairness and objectivity are essential to maintaining public trust and democratic discourse. In his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls underscored the importance of fairness in access to information, arguing that “a just society must ensure equal access to knowledge for all individuals (1971, 45). The BBC’s Editorial Guidelines state that journalists must remain “impartial, accurate, and independent” in their reporting, recognizing that biased reporting distorts reality and misleads the public (BBC, 2021, 23).

The dangers of biased reporting are evident in state-controlled media in authoritarian regimes, where information is manipulated to serve political interests. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea saw widespread propaganda used to justify military actions, demonstrating how media bias can be weaponized (Pomerantsev 2015, 86).

Confidentiality and Respect for Privacy

While information dissemination serves the public interest, it must not violate individual privacy or confidentiality. Ethical journalism demands that personal data and sensitive information be handled responsibly. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Article 12) asserts that individuals have a right to privacy, and media organizations must respect this principle (UN 1948,4). The Ethical Journalism Network warns against unnecessary intrusions into personal lives unless justified by overwhelming public interest (EJN 2015,8).

A critical example of ethical failure is the News of the World phone hacking scandal (2011), in which journalists illegally accessed private voicemails to obtain sensational stories. The scandal led to public outrage, legal action, and the closure of the newspaper (Davies 2014,39).

Accountability and Transparency

Information disseminators should take responsibility for their content and should correct errors promptly.

Transparency in reporting strengthens public trust and media credibility.

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The New York Times Ethics Handbook states that media organizations must “admit mistakes openly and correct them promptly” (NYT 2017,12). Mill’s “marketplace of ideas” theory supports transparency, arguing that public trust depends on honest and accountable discourse (1859,15).

An example of strong accountability was seen when The Washington Post retracted its incorrect report on Trump’s 2020 election phone call. The publication acknowledged its mistake, reinforcing its credibility (Farhi 2021,4).

Moral Implications of Propaganda

Propaganda is a form of communication intended to influence public opinion or behavior. Friedrich Nietzsche, noted, “propaganda is a form of manipulation, which can be used to shape public opinion and to influence behavior” (1999,12). This raises important questions about the moral implications of propaganda, including its potential for manipulation, deception, and coercion. Hannah Arendt argued that “propaganda is a form of totalitarianism, which seeks to control the minds and actions of individuals” (1981,34). This is because propaganda often relies on emotional appeals rather than rational argumentation to persuade individuals to adopt a particular point of view (1981,35). However, propaganda can also be used to promote democratic values, such as freedom and equality, by shaping public opinion and influencing behavior.

The Role of Journalism in a Democratic Society

At its core, journalism serves as a public good, providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions. The role of journalists in a democratic society is to report truth, hold power accountable, and present information that helps the public engage in meaningful civic participation. The concept of the “Fourth Estate” reinforces this responsibility, as journalism functions as an unofficial check on governmental and corporate power (Schudson 2003, 45).

However, this ideal is often compromised by economic and political pressures. The rise of corporate-owned media and the influence of advertising have led to concerns about journalistic integrity. When media outlets prioritize profit over truth, information dissemination becomes vulnerable to biases that reflect the interests of owners and advertisers rather than the public good. This raises ethical questions about whether journalists can truly be independent arbiters of truth when their institutions are subject to external influence.

Ethical Theories and Journalism

From a philosophical perspective, various ethical theories provide insight into journalists’ moral responsibilities. Utilitarianism, for example, suggests that journalists should aim to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In Mill’s opinion, “this might justify certain forms of propaganda if they serve a beneficial purpose, such as discouraging harmful behaviors or fostering social unity” (2001,56). However, this approach is problematic when propaganda leads to harmful consequences, such as public deception or war.

Deontological ethics, as proposed by Immanuel Kant, argues that truthfulness is a moral duty, regardless of consequences (1998, 78). From this perspective, journalists are obliged to report facts objectively, even if the truth is inconvenient or unpopular. This view underscores the importance of journalistic integrity and rejects the idea that misinformation can be justified for a greater good. Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle’s philosophy, emphasizes journalists’ moral character. A responsible journalist should embody virtues such as honesty, courage, and fairness, striving to inform the public without bias or manipulation. This approach suggests that ethical journalism is not just about following rules than fostering a culture of truthfulness and responsibility.

Propaganda in Democratic Societies and Their Ethical Dilemmas

In democratic societies, propaganda poses unique ethical challenges. While freedom of speech is a fundamental right, the spread of misinformation and propaganda can undermine democratic processes and societal trust.

Balancing the protection of free expression with the need to prevent harm from false or misleading information is an ongoing ethical dilemma.

In contrast to journalism, propaganda is intentionally crafted to shape public perception in ways that serve specific agendas. Ellul explains this further “It often relies on selective storytelling, emotional appeal, and omission of key facts to create a persuasive narrative” (1973,89). While propaganda has been used throughout history, such as in wartime efforts to boost national morality, it becomes ethically problematic when it distorts reality to manipulate public opinion.

The ethical dilemmas surrounding propaganda become even more pressing when it is disguised as legitimate journalism. For instance, during the Iraq War, “major media outlets uncritically reported government claims about weapons of mass destruction, contributing to widespread public support for military intervention” (Kumar 2012, 120). This raises significant moral concerns: Should journalists prioritize government narratives for national security reasons or should they remain steadfast in their commitment to investigative reporting? Moreover, the proliferation of digital media has intensified the spread of propaganda because social media platforms allow misleading information to reach mass audiences at unprecedented speeds. The challenge for ethical journalism, therefore, is to differentiate itself from propaganda by prioritizing verification, transparency, and accountability. In the Nigerian media landscape for instance, Odunlade, Ojo, and Oche (2021,94) observed, “misinformation and disinformation have become pervasive, and their spread has consequences for the country’s democracy, stability, and development....”They highlighted three major impacting examples witnessed in recent years.

- **The End SARS Protest:** Social misinformation: In 2020, false information was spread through social media platforms claiming that protesters involved in the #End SARS movement were looting and burning buildings. This led to further violence and the Nigerian military’s crackdown on peaceful protesters, resulting in many deaths and widespread damage.
- **Election Issue (Political Propaganda):** In the run-up to the 2015 Nigerian general election, false information was spread through social media platforms to influence voters and manipulate public opinion, leading to the defeat of the sitting president. In the elections of 2019 and 2023, such propaganda was spread again, including false claims about candidates’ backgrounds and political stances, which damaged the integrity of the election and caused widespread confusion. In fact, the spread of propaganda has been the most strategic tool employed by politicians to deceive the public and buy into their sensitivity.
- **The COVID-19 Issue:** In 2020, false information about the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly through social media and messaging apps in Nigeria. This included false cures and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, which caused fear and confusion among the public. The dissemination of this false information causes a lot of death than the virus itself. This is because many people were made to believe in certain cures that were not medically proven and subjected to such self-medication resulted in a drastic negative implication.

Potential Solutions and Ethical Journalism

Addressing ethical challenges in journalism requires a multifaceted approach. First, media literacy must be promoted to help the public critically assess information sources. When individuals are equipped with the skills to identify biased reporting and misinformation, they become less susceptible to manipulation (Mihailidis 2014,98). Second, stronger regulations and accountability measures should be implemented to combat misinformation. While concerns about censorship must be considered, ethical guidelines and fact-checking initiatives can help maintain journalistic integrity without infringing on free speech (Ward 2011, 45).

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Finally, the journalism industry must commit itself to ethical reforms. Encouraging transparency in reporting, providing public access to sources, and fostering a culture of accountability can help restore public trust in journalism. Investigative journalism, free from corporate or political influence, must be prioritized to ensure that truth prevails over propaganda.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The spread of propaganda has far-reaching moral implications for society, particularly in terms of its impact on shaping public opinion, political stability, and national security. This can fuel social and political tensions, disrupt the democratic process, and erode public trust in institutions and the media. One such implication is that, “it can lead to the spread of conspiracy theories and hate speech, which can result in incitement to violence and other forms of social unrest” (Falade 2027,7).

In a political context, when propaganda becomes systemic, it blurs the distinction between truth and falsehood, leading to the erosion of public trust. When individuals receive inaccurate information, they make uniformed decisions that can have widespread consequences, making people more susceptible to manipulation. Propaganda as a tool for information dissemination suppresses critical thought and democratic participation.

Again, propaganda reinforces ideological biases, leading to political polarization. Forming this bias fosters division and tribalism, where individuals become resistant to evidence and reason, further entrenching misinformation’s negative moral impact. Institutions that fail to provide accurate information contribute to moral harm because they facilitate deception and manipulation. Individuals also have a moral duty to critically evaluate sources and seek reliable information because their beliefs and actions influence broader societal outcomes.

In conclusion, journalism carries immense moral responsibility because it shapes public discourse and influences political and social realities. The distinction between ethical journalism and propaganda is critical because the dissemination of biased or misleading information can erode democracy, manipulate public perception, and deepen societal divisions. Philosophical perspectives on ethics emphasize journalists’ duty to uphold truthfulness, integrity, and accountability. In an era of increasing misinformation, it is imperative that media professionals and consumers critically engage with information. Through media literacy, regulatory measures, and a commitment to ethical journalism, society can work toward a future in which journalism remains a force for truth rather than a tool for manipulation.

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