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The Erosion of Public Trust: Examining the Societal Impact of Corruption in Journalism Practices

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ABSTRACT: The integrity of journalism is fundamental to a well-functioning democracy, yet corruption within the media industry has increasingly eroded public trust. This study examines the societal impact of corruption in journalism, focusing on how unethical practices such as bribery, biased reporting, sensationalism, and media ownership influence have compromised journalistic credibility. Through an exploration of historical cases and contemporary issues, this research analyzes the mechanisms through which journalistic malpractice distorts public perception, undermines democratic institutions, and fosters misinformation. The study employs theoretical frameworks on media ethics, public trust, and the role of journalism in democratic governance, while also proposing strategies for regulatory reforms, ethical training, and independent media oversight. The findings highlight the urgent need for enhanced accountability measures to restore journalistic integrity and rebuild public confidence in the media.

KEYWORDS: Corruption in journalism, Media ethics and integrity, Erosion of public trust, Sensationalism and biased reporting, Democracy and press freedom, Regulatory frameworks in journalism

I. INTRODUCTION

The public generally forms its opinions and perceptions by the type and quality of information they are provided. The media, in this context journalism profession, purports to enlighten the public by the dissemination and interpretation of accurate, fair, and contextual information regarding societal events (Adeyemi, 2013). The fourth estate of the realm facilitates public opinion and continuous democratic governance processes. This makes the profession one of the most important set of actors in society. However, as the credibility of actors is indispensable in achieving social development goals, there is a need to increase the integrity of journalists as the main actors in the media.

More significantly, the erosion of public trust in journalism as a result of corruption and other unethical practices demands urgent address in the face of the growing acceptance of the theory of public sphere and deliberative democracy. The negative implications are not only restricted to integrity and belief, they also extend further to attitudinal and behavioral change within the realm of societal affairs. Nevertheless, the apparent lack of coherent approach for publications aimed at understanding the effect of journalism corruption on public beliefs in social science literature has meant that relevant works which significantly explained how and under which conditions they take place have largely been overlooked. A rational social science approach thus formulated would perceive journalism in an interdependent relationship with public beliefs, examining how each is both a cause and effect of the other and both are in turn affected by their institutional and systemic environment and emerging norms and practices. This reciprocated approach would also constitute of external review of public trust- journalism-oriented studies, providing an outline of how their reforms can benefit other current publications and contribute to an integrated understanding of credibility and integrity in journalism. (Olayinka and Odunayo2024)

1.1. Background and Rationale

This research critically examines the erosion of public trust due to the corruption in journalistic practices. It provides a comprehensive guide on how to write professional research papers, yet it is also intended for members of the general public who have a tolerance for academic style writing. It delineates in detail the step-by-step guide for writing a professional research paper that is both informatics and demonstrative of the standards expected. Supplementary research tips are also included throughout. Prior to commencing this research, a foundational knowledge was gathered on essential



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aspects of corruption in the field of journalism. This has yielded tremendous insight and has made it possible to strike a more incisive angle for a meaningful academic investigation. It is expected that the information presented within this paper will also enlighten and advise as well as sophisticated understanding of journalism corruption and its consequences, particularly in widening the public view of the institutional corruption in media and journalism. Moreover, urged by deriving concern over its detrimental impact on the whole of society, this effort will present the research topic within the requisite background and rationale. (Duncan, 2023)

Corruption within the contemporary journalistic practices is both anomaly and a symptom. On the one hand, it is stale and regrettable occurrence that mirrors the field's transition from a public informing role to corporative profit-making. On the other hand, due to an integral function of the Fourth Estate in a democratic society, its appearance attests to a more general degradation of instance societal norms. Consistently, the rise of corruption in journalism is identified by some scholars as a catalyst to the erosion of public trust in the very notion of truth (Adeyemi, 2013). From the solid methodology immutably cherished by reporters turned "content producers", to structural practices opening media outlets to the influence of business elites, the challenge faced by the media when meeting their role in a democratic society is momentous. And the consequences of such failure would, in all certainty, reverberate far beyond the press room and into the social fabric. This is argued that by understanding the roots of corruption in journalism, academics, professionals, and policy-makers are better equipped to mitigate its effects, redirect its course, or prevent its occurrence. Moreover, while a growing number of academic articles address either separate instances of corruption in the media scene, or the principles behind the public relation coverage, in-depth societal examination of this multifaceted challenge is largely absent.

1.2. Research Objectives

The main research objectives are to estimate and describe the scale of the problem of unethical behavior in journalism practice globally; to commence a discussion on corruption and unethical behavior in journalism at an exclusive forum; to raise awareness of the erosion of public trust due to corruption in journalism practices; to explore public opinion and critique on unethical behavior in journalism practice, including corruption, sponsored journalism, low quality and sensational anchoring, plagiarism by news reporters and news organizations, news fabrication, etc.; to examine the impact and harm on society caused by corruption, including the erosion of public trust in journalism, which impacts democracy, public governance, protection of citizens' rights, and the welfare of society; and to kick off and develop networks of experts and stakeholders to create an ongoing approach to deal with the matter in both the Asia-Pacific region and on a global scale.

II. UNDERSTANDING CORRUPTION IN JOURNALISM

This section is dedicated to defining and exploring the multifaceted nature of corruption within journalism. Considering the framework of different journalistic functions, corruption can be defined as a deviant behavior in journalism which intentionally disrupts one or more of these functions. Corruption in journalism is no longer an isolated event, rather its various forms and intensities have generated a kind of self-reinforcing corruption landscape. It has been found that the way technical relations of corruption in journalism are organized will produce various implications for journalists, media, and news recipients (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2024). Through the historical context, this paper may provide an alternative explanation to why corrupt practices can be so prevalent and long-standing among journalists, and to why modernization in journalism has not only curtailed, but also further encouraged the corruption landscape. Since the first penny press newspaper in 1833, a market oriented journalism was shaped in the world. Credits and information endowments were declining while newspaper prices dropped further. The media landscape began to grow increasingly competitive with a focus on entertainment and news sensation. Challenges of journalistic integrity have existed since journalism was born. In more than two centuries, the press has confronted luxury, enormous personal gratuities, and many other sleazy business practices. So, journalism encountered a perfect storm of tough economic times and a product closely tied to governmental malfeasance. The Watergate scandal in the 1970s is but one of many celebrated instances in which the investigative function of the press played a crucial and positive role in promoting democratic development. But conversely, other literatures have dramatically portrayed how media freedom can become a for-profit business that is sold to the highest bidder, a domain for exports, or a more invasive means for the elites to govern society. The idea of yellow journalism actually refers to a sensationalist style in media reporting using eye-catching headlines and levity (Pereda & Cartier, 2024).



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2.1. Definition and Types of Corruption

As one of the most important pillars of democracy, a journalist must strictly abide by journalism ethics. Corruption, which has emerged alongside journalism, causes erosion of public trust and ultimately makes journalism lose its vital function. Corruption in journalism is a reality that can be observed worldwide. The literature on media corruption has tried to find definitions and categories specific to journalism in accordance with various sociocultural and legal environments. When reviewed in a broader perspective, it could be seen that corruption in journalism consists of behaviours engaging the spreaders of information from bribery to sensationalism (Adeyemi, 2013). To get a better understanding and deeper knowledge of the subject on corruption in journalism, it is crucial to clearly segregate the concepts of corruption observed as parts of news production, dissemination, and relationship-making activities. Specialists, activists, policy makers and legal bodies often encounter difficulties in combating this issue since they all too frequently fail to differentiate exactly what behaviour they mean as corrupt journalism and within which practice zone it occurs.

Transparently exploring the mechanics of these corruption types will let the stakeholders recognise and act on them better. From promotion of news in exchange for financial or non-financial gain to fabrication of news events; corruption in journalism is a subject with a broad scale of syndromes. While some practices of corruption may initially seem to be much more serious than others by definition due to their devastating outcomes, all forms of corruption work to undermine the credibility of journalism in the grand scheme (Matherly and Greenwood2022). Behaviours of invitation of financial inducements for news release, solicitation of resources in exchange for news coverage, and acceptance of gifts in return for positive coverage are forms of corruption observed in the stage of news production. Exaggerating the news and utilizing dubious sources in reporting are also common syndromes commonly seen as corrupt practices in many cases which are part of the activity of disseminating news. On an interpersonal level, favouritism in news coverage and discrimination of news actors during their interaction with journalists are also counted as acts of corruption (Henshaw, 2024)

2.2. Historical Context

This article explores the erosion of public trust caused by corruption within journalistic practices. The following discussion reviews the history of corruption in journalism. It is essential for every newspaper to have a strict principle that is neither to suppress the news nor to publish anything in it that is false and discreditable to general morals. However, over time the world doesn't follow the ideals.

Journalism developed in the seventeenth century in several Eastern European countries, often regarded as the first country where newspapers were being published. However, a significant correlation quickly developed between the editorials published in these newspapers and the politics of the editor's side. A well-known case of the politicization of journalism was the journalist Ninus Ignac Bogost, who defended the Habsburg in a series of articles in the years after the battle of Mohacs in 1526. Even Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States, wanted the press connected to his government during his time in office. At every impetus from the political authority, the newspapers begin to write articles that support the rulers' policies. Newspapers that criticize are immediately silenced with tools of government, such as taxes or provocation. (Jakovljevic et al.2021)

As the flow of information increased with the broad use of digital technology, mass communication changed in terms of presentation and content. This swift transformation necessitated the reevaluation of journalistic ethics and the discussion of new phenomena emerging within the scope of the issue. The profession that emerges with the aim of learning the right-to-independent information from all sides and conveying it to the public, "takes power on the people" as it is known. Powered by his beliefs, he began to see the people as enemies who wanted to topple him. The newspapers in the beggar used these beliefs for their benefit. Of course, the prohibition of opposition newspapers was not enough to consolidate the dictatorship of the beggar. The Journalist Law imported and written by him and passed by the ballot box was considered as "an extremely clear act of tyranny" by The Times magazine. (Maksymchuk et al.2022)

III. THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF CORRUPTION IN JOURNALISM

Corruption in journalism is not limited to the journalists that take part in bribery, extortion, and blackmail. There is a growing body of research on the issue of how journalism as an institution suffers from corruption or becomes a prop to



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corrupt practices. The far-reaching consequences of journalism corruption beyond the practice implications are less studied. This section investigates the societal impact of bad journalism in terms of corruptive practices. The focus will be on the journalists directly.

Significant is the loss of credibility and the trust in the profession among citizens. Corruption in the journalistic field is used to explain the broader concept of unethical if not professionally illegal practices such as bribing, extortion. Yet the corrupted journalism in the broader sense is more appropriate to explain the social contract between media and society in their sense of eternal suspicion and doubt, where normally healthy skepticism to power leads to an insatiable distrust rendering public opinion capricious and overly gullible toward facts and affairs. A basic and initial casualties in this erosion of the analysts and the journalists' integrity. Among the journalists, this compromise in an individual level results in complete credibility blackout, providing analysts and news aggregators. Those that once used to have the prerogatives of news-making on the events are the target of serious and stiff critique. Nevertheless the de-reputational process might be systemically threatening to the society. The bad practice profile of journalism shorn analysts and news aggregators does not just cease to exist, but is left in pure content production business within a murky and clouded environment unfavorable to news integrity providing legitimacy by hypothesis to any available conspiracy theory. It sparks a vicious cycle, setting forth a rather grim sociological play in which the trustful citizens demand for accurate information is satisfied by second or third vivid rubbish analysis. Subsequently, well-established and factual news is discredited or remains foreseen. (Wijaya, 2022)

3.1. Diminished Credibility and Trust

In June, journalism's watchdog took a hit in a brawl revolving Tom Llamas. That was when President Trump was hammered for allegedly sitting on Russian intelligence. The user of social media alerted the United States to Trump's neglect of information—news leaks that were oracles to military strategy. The armchair investigator smelled something rotten on both sides of the Hudson. Yet, Llamas shut him down. An ABC investigator in Pasadena commanded that his twitter about a 'national security breach' be taken down. He alleged that ABC was 'working the story'. The dotted line was thus followed to nefarious depths. The Pasadena policeman was an undercover. There was no investigation on the story. And there never would be. (Romano, 2021)

There is a plethora of damaging headlines that have come to light in the meantime. The firing of executive producer Chris Vlasto. That, according to the New York Daily News, was because Vlasto 'breached journalistic ethics' in mixing personal and professional agendas. Then there was the photographing of Union General Mathis, fired for sexual scandal. This had nothing to do with the hosting of the Great Militancy of the Russian Desert, or the medevac of eco-radical vanity. Moreover, there were no leaks. That story was 'completely untrue'; it was 'fake'. There was however, someone in Military Intelligence who was 'unleashing' the Porsche on Trump. And the ethics of photographing the general at Marabad's restaurant after exiling the Empire Horseholder? Disgusting (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). Now, why don't you all just report the news. I'll attend to the rest.

3.2. Political and Social Consequences

In the field of journalism, corruption has a considerable number of meanings. However, common and widely accepted definitions of corrupt journalist practices regard them as an act that violates the ethical standards of journalism, ethically unsound news production, or news production practices that can inflict damage on the credibility and reliability of the news. Attended with the three type of political, demographic, and economic effect of the degradation and erosion in journalism practice, results can transfer new approaches to this field thereby contribute to the literature.

One of the most dangerous results of corruption in journalism is that it is a tool to manipulate public opinion and deepen the existing power relations of the group. Since people acquire the reality they know through the senses mostly through the news and media, it is normal to influence their thoughts and behavior patterns. However, if journalism and news, which is the source of reality, are corrupt, reality is inevitably deformed, and people are forced to accept a reality that is created. An individual or group that guides journalism naturally also guides society. The illegal or illegitimate tasks undertaken by journalism within a certain group make the division in the society visible and give rise to complaints and a sense of unfairness.



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This case deeply relations also with the power structures in society. There are many examples of corrupt journalism that have ensured the survival of the administration despite the widespread request for change. The “Yemeni Khan operation” performed in Pakistan in 2014 and the 2016 coup d’état in Turkey are the most concrete examples of how corrupt journalism can keep the dominant power alive, damaging societal consensus and trust (Al-Shami, 2019). The coup attempt in Turkey was over in a very short time. Public consensus and strong social resistance, especially in the context of journalism due to media with youtube and twitter, have a major share in failure. However, the efforts in the past have been crowned with success in Pakistan and have made a great perception of the coup. With the spread of supportive news and comments, the attitudes of the majority against the coup always been “If this is done, it is necessary” shaped and did not favor the elected administration. (Javidiani, 2018). In short, corrupt journalism directly threatens freedoms, facilitates the amassing and maintenance of power, and consolidates the essence and deepening of power dynamics.

IV. CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES

Transgressions of trust are not always top-of-mind in the public consciousness. Among laypersons, historians, academics from other fields, and even journalists themselves, priorities take precedence. This often involves conducting and disseminating the latest hot take of events in a world that is rife with bombshell developments. Yet, in the age of having information at one’s fingertips, with any given subject’s history, context, and ethos one search engine query away, the hope is that perhaps this sentiment is misjudged. It is incumbent upon all who give and receive news stories, who work in and around the media, who struggle directly and indirectly with its incalculable social ramifications, to have at least one eye on a disciplining past. Maybe then current mistakes will not be perpetuated.

There are plenty of readily available and still relevant examples. The Jayson Blair scandal that engulfed The New York Times at once turned a spotlight on and cast a shadow over an esteemed newsroom. Sandy Goodman’s relentless and misguidedly scoured exposé into the murky world of local television news pushed the fourth estate to engage in necessary self-assessment. Recent revelations about Cokie Roberts having been paid by the government of Morocco to make positively slanted reports about that country’s leadership requirement for additional reflection, given her status as the voice of an objective journalist (Sofia Mello, 2017). Similarly, something ought to be said of Maria Bartiromo and Neil Cavuto failing to assure that the gasbag they frequently interviewed was disclosed as having unreported conflicts of interest, which, it seems safe to say, scant few watched it knew. This risk of neglecting certain historical narratives, and therefore making it more likely the corrosion of journalistic practices may occur, is what the research endeavors to avoid. Conducting an account of well-known legal violations and examining what changes they wrought and problems they left unaddressed will, ideally, better acquaint practitioners and observers of the news a more inclusive portrayal of these controversies. (Pniewsky, 2024)

4.1. Watergate Scandal

The mysterious Watergate Scandal became a significant turning point in journalism. In the early 1970s, a politically motivated burglary aiming to discredit Democratic National Committee members ignited investigative journalism and established a vocal and vigilant press as a vital actor in the fight against corruption. Building upon the Pulitzer Prize-earning reporting and the subsequent chain of events, this infamously complicated narrative continues to both captivate and frighten the broader public. The case serves as a benchmark for evaluating the erosion of trust in media practices, and a presumptive outcome on public sentiment when power is scrutinized. However, it is also said that scandal reporting aimed at discrediting the subject blurs the line between whistle blowing and gossip, giving off an overtone of illegitimacy. The power of public scrutiny and the necessity for democratic monitoring puts onus upon the media to investigate and police governmental corruption. But the skeptic remains philosophical of the Fourth Estate’s moral high ground in presenting itself as unbiased, watchdog, and muckraker. (Dureska, 2007)

4.2. News of the World Phone Hacking Scandal

The recent focus on policy-based corruption has overshadowed attention on the older, arguably more insidious, forms of corruption linked to journalism practices. Looking at case studies reveals continued unethical behavior by journalists and the market needs driving them. From the scandalous phone hacking organised from NoTW newsroom to deadline-exhausted meditation managers handing out wads of unmarked toledo, the general public got a shocking look at the endemic corruption and neglect within its media institutions. Such corruption doesn’t simply affect individuals, it has



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immense implications for public trust and privacy possibly raising broader normative questions about press freedom and media ownership in an increasingly digital world. (Wijaya, 2022)

According to (Fenton, 2019), as the scandal unfolded, so did a series of ongoing criminal inquiries including a second police investigation into bribery of public officials at The Sun. Outrage emerged, with thousands of victims suing Murdoch's empire, and a public inquiry into NoTW and press practices set. Out of such events, and all their connections emerged various issues related to legal regulation, journalism ethics, government-media relations, including commercial and overly political viability, manifestations of the tensions within any democracy having to rely on a 'consenting' press integral for maintaining certain forms of property and power. Polls taken in the aftermath of the scandal show an overwhelming percentage of the British people no longer trust the self-regulation of the press. Family members of those killed in the 2005 London terrorist bombings as well as a murdered schoolgirl, revealed to be the victim of phone hacking, have called for a broader examination of media institutions and an urgent reconceptualization of press freedom and its norms. For the journalism industry corruption reveals equal parts criminality, flexibility, and resistance while the decades encrusted layers of political and occupational calculation shading them makes it a messy object of inquiry. This study examines the News of the World (NoTW) phone hacking scandal as a case study of journalism corruption. (Chivers, 2021)

V. STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING CORRUPTION IN JOURNALISM

This section introduces proactive approaches to address and combat corruption in journalism. With the democratic function of the media in mind, regulation should be reinforced in order to enable a higher level of accountability to which the press and journalists can be held (Adeyemi, 2013). While media law and policies dominate both in allowing and prohibiting certain activities, structural changes within media organizations may deter the use of the most visible forms of corruption. For one, the financial dependence of the media on actors in society should be scrutinized with an eye towards its impact. Moreover, managerial practices, notably those involving recruitment and promotion, allow businesses or political actors to place their own interests above professional standards. This study argues that both an ethical commitment to quality journalism and a desire to serve the public interest should motivate a commitment to transparency; public interest journalists need audiences to know that their reports are reliable. Also suggested are certain lines of conduct that might facilitate investigative journalism through the establishment of routine practices and robust networks of support. It is further argued that these practices and networks could enhance the perceived credibility of public interest journalism, fostering public trust in both this sector and journalism more broadly (Javidiani, 2018). But above all, this study suggests an affirming orientation. It is hoped that by encouraging young reporters to undertake both background research and regular teamwork, both they and their reports may more easily withstand the hostility of a fragmented and distrustful society.

5.1. Regulatory Measures

It is a time-tested cliché, almost, that the media is the lifeblood of democracy and that a free press is a cornerstone of any just and fair society. Given that a country such as South Africa, having emerged only in the mid-1990s from many decades of apartheid darkness, might in 2012 seem to possess a rich and vibrant media industry, gives some hope (Obuya, 2012). But a new dawn can have cloudy days too and South Africa has been struggling to define media freedom and thus to uphold it. Part of that struggle has been over the largely unexplored and unresolved issue of the Erosion of Public Trust in the wake of a series of scandals involving corruption on the part of journalists. This essay will examine the societal impact of such corruption in both its existing and potential modes as well as suggest ways in which it might be combatted. (Ndawana et al., 2021)

In the face of severe social and political upheaval there has been a steady destruction of public trust placed in the media to reveal key truths purposively and with a degree of balance. As South Africa enters its third decade as a fully-fledged democracy there has been a discernible tipping of media practitioners towards their overshadowing by concerns of publicity, profitability and corporate policy (Gore & Horgan, 2010). Journalistic principles of uncovering secrecy, of being a voice of the oppressed and of holding the powerful to account seem now to have been largely lost within the ethos of the newsroom. But there is another emergent danger to the reputation and effectiveness of the media and it is in its potential for a future benevolent dictatorship of censorship and preference. This may already have begun to happen in the shadow of the prevention of Hate Speech Bill of 2012.



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5.2. Journalistic Ethics and Standards

As the Fourth Estate of the realm, journalism has been an agenda setter, mobilizer of public opinion and watchdog in a democratic society. However, the role of the media, including journalism, in fighting corruption has been relentless. To effectively deal with societal malaise, the media should embrace credible, professional journalism at all levels - print, broadcast and online across the globe. Journalists are bound to be taught to raise the right questions and establish the honesty of potential sources through verification, which helps to create corruption legends based on fact. (Mpofu et al.2022)

Media organizations must establish an atmosphere in which such an investigation can be performed, and that must proceed under the assumption that this task is not fair to all concerns (Adeyemi, 2013). In the period leading up to an election, the need for news is clearly heightened, but any heading to the extent that significant questions about corruption are being raised tends to deflect and may well turn the reader's attention to the usual struggle between the political party and the individual politician. It essential that journalists recognize this pressure, remind themselves that their prime loyalty is to the reader, and work through the filtration of all candidates. It may well become apparent that the journalist is short-listing a policy question, such as labour on privatization or the Liberals on Europe, rather than a question of abuse of power, but it can be brought from black working accusations, widely suggested behaviour of factions, by trying to rise the right questions. This then becomes a matter both for the journalist and the newspaper, as an independent organization, to raise pertinent questions and publish the answer in their entirety. It may also be the requirement of ethical assistance, for example, to investigate classified directories in the chambers or, if there are grounds for initiating a possible investigation, to act under its umbrella. (Neilson & Gibson, 2022)

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