Print Media Standardisation and Professionalism
Determinants of independence of Ghanaian media

Jacob Nyarko & Ruth E. Teer-Tomaselli

PRINT MEDIA STANDARDISATION AND PROFESSIONALISM
Determinants of independence of Ghanaian media

Jacob Nyarko and **Ruth E. Teer-Tomaselli**

The independence of the media under Ghana's Fourth Republic is assessed from the perspective of standards and professionalism. Using a qualitative method, the study shows that unethical practices are evident in the print media landscape in Ghana, and argues that this can be traced to four major spheres: educational qualification, existence of several professional associations, a weak regulatory body and "money matters". Overall, the study argues that legalities form a minimal part of the independence of the Ghanaian media but concerns about freedom seem to be self-inflicted by the very media practitioners through their actions and sometimes questionable reportage.

KEYWORDS   ethics; freedom; independence; media; newspaper; print; provocation; standards

Introduction

The transition of the Ghanaian presidency baton in 2001 from the National Democratic Congress (NDC) to the National Patriotic Party (NPP) ushered in a new phase in government–media relations. This transition also shifted focus on to the appalling media performance that came with it. According to reports published at the time, most Ghanaians saw the media's output as a violation of the country's culture, considering the persistent use of foul language in the media space, coupled with numerous unsupported published allegations (Sarpong and Safo 2002). The situation seems to have worsened with the approach of the December 2016 elections. For example, the Ghanaian media was accused by observers of creating a polarisation designed along ethnic paths and of spreading rumours using defamatory and provocative language as late as the 2008 elections, with this leading to a potential risk to the country's security (Olorunnisola, cited in Mukhongo 2010, 347). This situation required close attention by the entire Ghanaian society including media users, owners and politicians, as well as media workers and quasi-media institutions, to help develop a sense of professionalism that will enable them to play their democratic roles as expected (Mahama 2012, 110). Ben Ephson, the Managing Editor of a privately owned newspaper in Ghana, expressed the opinion that media institutions can make and unmake a country as well as individuals, institutions and governments (Sawant 2003, 17). This is because ethical contradictions have the tendency to jeopardise peace (Mfumbusa 2008, 152).

These concerns suggest that in as much as the independence of the media needs to be accorded all the necessary guarantees, it comes with a sense of responsibility which became so indispensable that it was embodied in the American 1947 Hutchins Commission ("Concept of social responsibility"). For the media to hold on to their reputation and

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

independence, they need an in-depth understanding and awareness of their key responsibility to deliver a good public service (Bertrand 2000, 4). The need to adhere to ethical practices in media is contained in a statement that observance of professional and ethical reporting is the best means for the media to regain public trust and respect, and to contribute profoundly to the process of democratisation (Nyamnjoh 2005, 99). Ethics in journalism means "behaving in a professional manner" and it is applicable to all media workers, whether in print or broadcasting. For instance, a practising code must ensure that practitioners knowingly will not misreport, will not quote out of context, will not suppress relevant facts, and will not slant a story to reflect their own or their editor's prejudices (Ross 1999, 23). Furthermore, "media ethics" entails a "body of principles and rules, fashioned by the profession, preferably in cooperation with media users, in order that media can better serve most, if not all groups within the population" (Bertrand 2000, 4). This explains that a code could only prove successful if it has been agreed upon by the media fraternity itself instead of being imposed by an external authority like government or the judiciary (Kasoma 1994, 40; Ross 1999, 25).

The question is, why do practitioners flout their own collective codified standards and ethics? As part of the "government–media relations" debate in Ghana over the years, accusing fingers have been pointed at the ruling class extensively for the woes of the media (Kasoma 1995; Asante 1996; Gadzekpo 1997; Whitten-Woodring 2009; Kellam and Stein 2014). However, it appears that the independence of the media lies in their own hands and that disregard to collective instituted codes seems to serve as an affront to their freedom. For instance, Mupfurutsa (1999, 107) has argued: "the media has become the object of public and government outrage … Journalism has been equated with uncivilized political propaganda and criticised for its bias, irresponsible and unethical behaviour".

The aim of this article is to identify the factors that fuel unethical practices in the print media industry and to explore the degree to which these determine the independence of the Ghanaian media under the Fourth Republic.

Literature Review

Bertrand (2000, 5) delved into media ethics and accountability and explained that three factors informed the evolution of media ethics. Bertrand argues that firstly, the increase in social enlightenment through formal education made citizens (audience) able to better understand what a good media service was, and aggressively demanded to consume better news. Lando (2013, 41) concurred. She noted that media users (readers, listeners and viewers) were constantly flooded with news and presentations that were unethical and raised eyebrows. Secondly, media practitioners were also better educated than previously and valued the enjoyment of social prestige that comes with good practices. The majority found the unethical behaviour of a minority in the profession unacceptable. Thirdly, issues of ethics tended to hurt the very people who were to blame; falling newspaper sales and advertising occur when advertisers consider media credibility prior to placing adverts. Thus, there has been a shift from the era where media is the preserve of journalists to the all-inclusive domain where the audience and society are not passive receivers of information but active, and their concerns over ethics need to be catered for (Nassanga 2008, 648).

Tettey (2006, 244) explored the politics of media accountability in Africa and examined the efficacy of mechanisms and institutions in place. He found that in Africa,

whereas some media outlets and journalists worked effectively to maintain professional standards and ensure accountability for their operations, the performance of a section of the same media fraternity was questionable because they smeared professionalism with unrestrained party politics and/or economic considerations. Tomaselli (2003, 432) undertook a critique of professional issues in African journalism from the perspective of the educational setup and highlighted that the existing curricula needs modification to encapsulate the cultural dimension of society because there was a mismatch between students' perception of their culture as against ethics of the media profession. This position, Tomaselli believed, forms the core of media ethics. In agreement with this assertion, Teer-Tomaselli (2001) reiterated that the study of the interplay of media and culture enables journalism students to gain in-depth understanding of the context and processes of society on which they be reporting when they enter the media industry. Thus, media practitioners cannot operate in seclusion from the community in which they reside. Indigenous customs and traditions and an awareness and understanding of acceptable cultural and religious norms have a huge impact on what is perceived as ethics (Ross 1999, 23). For instance, studies in India and the Middle East showed that although journalists valued truth-telling as a basic ethical principle, they were willing to weigh truth against competing principles, for example, respect, protecting someone's privacy and religious tendencies (Rao and Lee 2005, 116). In such an instance, truth will be suppressed if that would cause grievous personal, social or religious conflict (Musa and Domatob 2007, 321). Thus, ethnicity, sacredness of authority and community are significant dimensions of the ethical landscape in Africa (Mfumbusa 2008, 145). In their article that seeks to design the "ethics of universal beings", Christians et al. (2008, 136) opined that "journalism practitioners in Africa and around the world increasingly have to consider how the ethical framework underpinning their work is influenced by globalisation". Bauman buttressed this position on the grounds that:

> We live in a globalising world. That means that all of us, consciously or not, depend on each other. Whatever we do or refrain from doing affects the lives of people who live in places we'll never visit. And whatever those distant people do or desist from doing has its impact on the conditions in which we, each one of us separately and together, conduct our lives. (Bauman 2001)

This reaffirms the position that the extent to which Western media ethics has permeated other traditions is rooted in the "shared experience" of colonisation in which both colonisers and the colonised were impacted (Christians et al. 2008, 161). Furthermore, Sawant (2003, 16) noted that in both print and broadcast media, the necessity for ethics has been felt everywhere, thus fuelling the need for a mechanism to enforce ethical standards on the premise that the "world has become a global village" where the global dominant influences of economic, political, social and cultural dimensions do not isolate any part of the earth. Lando (2013) interviewed 85 graduates from Christian tertiary institutions who work in the Kenyan media industry on issues of ethics. She observed a disconnect between Christian faith principles and professionalism/ethics exhibited on the job, and that even graduates from Christian universities who were trained beyond professional ethics were not able to integrate these virtues into the industry; instead the media environment dramatically influenced them. Lando further noted that ethical challenges were the same across all media outlets, whether government, private enterprise or church-owned, and ranged from influences by owners, advertisers, gatekeepers, competition, pressure

to conform, profit, pressure to produce a story, falsify information to coerce the subjects of the story to tell the truth, greed and desperation for money, or survival in the profession (either toe the line or get the doors shut to accessing news sources).

Citing incidences of irresponsible media activities, Wasserman (2010, 583) identified that in South African and Namibian tabloids, there was occasional irresponsible reportage viewed from different perspectives. Wasserman identified three main areas in which irresponsible behaviours contributing to the erosion of the credibility of newspapers occurred. These were, firstly, sensationalism and sleaze, which one politician described as "talking about what happens in your pants". Secondly, social movement intermediaries held a "tabloids focus" on the failures of government on a shallow level and did not consider macro-economic and political challenges; and lastly journalists' failure to admit and correct errors. To a large extent, "African journalists are largely seen as a *professional body* who cannot be trusted with the responsibility of carrying out journalistic chores competently and honourably" (Kasoma 1994, 26). This perception has raised questions and debates about the credibility of journalists and whether they qualify as a recognised profession (Ross 1999, 23; Nassanga 2008, 650). Critics have cited lack of universally accepted training levels, certification to entry and practice, and difficulties in implementing ethical codes as some of the measures that go against the recognition of media as a profession (Nassanga 2008, 651). Friend and Singer concluded that:

> The distinction between journalism and other forms of publication rests primarily on ethics—as does, ultimately, the journalist's professional survival. How the journalist does his or her job will be fundamental to whether that job continues to hold any value, or even exist at all, in a world in which anyone can be a publisher but not necessarily a journalist. (Friend and Singer 2015, xxiii)

They appear to suggest that professional journalism cannot co-exist with unethical practices and that the observance of ethics in professional journalism draws a clear-cut line between them and other forms of writers. Thus, without the observance of ethics, a media institution has no justification to exist. To Minnie (2001, 35), a code of ethics constitutes a voluntary contract between media practitioners and society because the codes are expected to guide the behaviour of journalists. She explained that the public and journalists themselves can use ethical codes as a yardstick to evaluate the performance of the profession. Writing on traditions, conventions and ethics, Friend (2015, 5) noted that in 1912, the American Society of Newspaper Editors documented a code of ethics that place independence above all other principles. The code said in part, "Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital". By this, remaining trustworthy to the society at whose service the media operate cannot be overlooked.

As the number of print media outlets continues to increase in Ghana, an exploration into ethical concerns and standardisation of their operations will significantly contribute to defining future policies of media independence, and of expression generally, under the current democratic dispensation.

Methods

This study relied on a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is an inquiry aimed at describing and clarifying human experience as it appears in people's lives. Its data are gathered primarily in the form of spoken or written language rather than in the

form of numbers (Polkinghorne 2005). Interview is the means by which one gets to know other people's beliefs, attitudes and expectations, and to gain understanding into the cognitive models that shape their views of the world (Kripendorff 2004). Fifteen interviewees granted face-to-face interviews and the research population was composed of experienced editors ($N = 4$) and senior reporters ($N = 6$) who currently work for four newspaper media houses drawn equally from government and privately owned newspapers to ensure equal representation. Senior management representatives of media regulatory ($N = 1$) and professional bodies ($N = 1$) who also trained as journalists, and media activists drawn from academia ($N = 2$) and regional media organisations ($N = 1$), also participated in the interview. The study was conducted in the Greater-Accra Region, the capital of Ghana, because it is the location of the seat of government and most newspaper firms are head-quartered there. The region has a population of 4,010,054 with a land area of 3245 km^2 (Ghana Statistical Service 2010). The reach of newspaper circulation was the single variable that dictated the selection of the media outlets to participate in the interview. Due to the calibre of the population who were elites (media practitioners), the interviews were conducted solely in English. The audio-captured interviews lasted between one and two hours. Two of the participants opted not to be audio-recorded so their responses were captured manually. Participants were given non-financial souvenirs as a reward after the interview.

Analysis

Data collected were transcribed and organised thematically for analysis. Thematic analysis is described as a form of recognising patterns within data so that identified themes become categories for analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Thus, a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data-set (Braun and Clarke 2006). This study adapted Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis due to the flexible nature of the design. These are data familiarisation, initial codes generation, themes search, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production (Braun and Clarke 2006) to guide data synthesisation, organisation and analysis. Finally, data were categorised for analysis and extracted themes were labelled as: educational levels of media practitioners; membership association; regulatory body effectiveness; and "money matters" in relation to media standards and professionalism in Ghana.

Results

The study showed that, generally, journalistic standards were low in sections of the print media, and the media publish stories that fall short of the ethical codes of the profession. This is coupled with the fact that the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) and National Media Commission (NMC) are under-resourced and some members of the media fraternity disregard their influence. To some extent, unprofessionalism in the landscape was attributed to the private media, laymen in the sector and low remuneration. These findings are presented for analysis under the following subjects: educational levels of media practitioners; membership association; regulatory body effectiveness; and "money matters" in relation to media standards and professionalism in Ghana.

Educational Levels of Media Practitioners

This theme seeks to explore acquisition of official training of would-be media practitioners with the required journalistic skills in order to maintain standards of professionalism in their reporting. Overall, participants explained that some unqualified persons practise journalism in Ghana and it is attributed mainly to the desire to hire cheap labour:

> We shouldn't forget that journalists are human, especially the up-and-coming ones. There are also those who lack the basic knowledge in journalism in the system. We shouldn't also confuse this issue of anybody who finds himself in the media work as being a professional journalist like some of the panellists at various radio platforms. Most of them are not professional journalists so their work leaves much to be desired when compared to those of us who are trained professional journalists. Some people say that journalism is not a profession which some of us disagree with. (Participant 13)

From the above quote, the participant established that two groups of people work in the Ghanaian media environment: those who have undergone journalism training and others who lack the required training. From the informant's view, trained journalists exhibit high professionalism in their work and unethical media practices is a quality associated with untrained individuals in the media market. Furthermore, the participant debunked the notion that journalism is a layman's job that anybody can practise. Another participant stated that some journalists behave unethically:

> Yes, freedom is abused sometimes. They even describe it as some kind of the "tyranny of the media". Some of my colleagues think that they have got the power to write so they go about writing all sorts of things about individuals, not thinking of their reputation. Reputation is very difficult to build so if you destroy your reputation, you will use many years to build [it]. You see people fabricating stories about others. You don't get it why they do that. Only God knows. (Participant 4)

From the above, the media in Ghana sporadically go beyond their boundaries. Without distinguishing between trained and untrained personnel in the media landscape, this informant noted that some journalists publish stories to tarnish the image of other people. Moreover, the participant explained that such journalists pride themselves as having a sense of power in society. Ethical standards in Ghana's print media are not strictly adhered to and in some situations, some journalists design fictitious stories.

Commenting further on acquiring media qualification *vis-à-vis* remuneration and its relationship to ensuring high ethical standards, the following was evident:

> Sometimes it all borders on funds because if you have to get good writers, you must recruit those with higher qualifications through higher education and that means that you have to pay them very well. If you don't have funds to attract them, then you have to do with what you have and that will result in low quality, etc. So, it's a sort of mixed. We have papers of high quality, well-written stories in terms of content, the way the paper is packaged and you will find value, whereas there are others too who are not doing so well. (Participant 10)

According to the above participant, high journalistic standards depend on the calibre of journalists that a media outlet hires. There are highly qualified media practitioners in the media environment but only satisfactory remuneration will attract their services. The

type of personnel a media firm can afford often determines its professional standards. There are two groups of newspaper outlets: those who employ skilled journalists who have high professional standards and others who do not meet the standard. Similarly, another respondent noted:

> Regarding standards, a lot is left to be desired. We still have a long way to go because we have qualified people who don't come to the mainstream media when they qualify from the college or university. I … could tell you that [among] my colleagues [who] finished from the School of Communication Studies [Masters], I am the only one in the mainstream media or maybe in the private media. Those who are also in media are in media-related fields like advertising, PR [public relations] and others because they see it [mainstream media] as not too lucrative. Standard wise, it is not too good. (Participant 4)

From the perspective of Participant 4, people have attained higher media degrees in Ghana, however, the standard of journalism is still not the best because many qualified graduates are unwilling to practise the profession since the salary is not enticing. Alternatively, media graduates prefer to work for well-paid media-related sectors rather than going into the conventional media terrain. This situation means that the Ghanaian media are far from attaining the desired professional standards. Playing a blame-game for lapses of standards in the Ghanaian media market, a respondent explained:

> Problems with unprofessionalism are more [often] associated with the private [rather] than the state media. By virtue of the fact that they wouldn't want to pay properly, they tend not to employ the right calibre of people to do the work. They often pick anybody because the person can put some sentences together, and so ethics and professionalism is at times overlooked. That is why the private media are often dragged to court over cases of libel and defamation. (Participant 6)

The above participant distinguished between the operations of the private and state media with respect to professional standards and established that unprofessionalism is a feature of the private media sector, because they are unwilling to hire the services of qualified journalists. They recruit inexperienced hands to do the job, and these people occasionally flout ethical standards. This, the respondent noted, explains the high frequency of court cases brought against them.

Professional Membership Association

This theme assessed the impact membership associations have made on professionalism and ethics in the print media. There are a number of professional media associations in Ghana, but this work focused on the GJA, which functions as an umbrella professional body. It describes this code of ethics saying: "[t]he GJA Code of Ethics was drawn as a ready reference guide and is applicable to members in the state-owned media, private media and the local freelance journalists" (Ghana Journalists Association 2011, 76). Generally, participants observed that GJA has a code of ethics in place, but members often ignore the code. The following responses attest to this:

> Oh yes! Abuse exists without doubt. Some of us have abused if not over-abused the freedom now that there is no Criminal Libel [Law]. People in the print media even publish insults, obscene materials and libellous content without any regard [for it]. The

> GJA as a professional body is doing its work to stop [the] abuse of media freedom. They have their code of ethics but the problem is that not all journalists are members of the Association and even those who are members, what sanctions can be taken against them when they abuse the freedom of the press? So it becomes "a freedom for all". (Participant 9)

From the view of Participant 9, sections of the print media have overstepped the privileges that come with the repeal of the Criminal Libel Law due to the foul content they sometimes publish. The GJA has no authority when members violate its ethics and, moreover, the problem is compounded by the fact that some practising Ghanaian journalists are not members of the Association.

Similarly, Participant 2 noted that the media landscape in Ghana has witnessed an influx of media firms who should be cautious of their responsibilities. Moreover, the respondent emphasised that in certain parts of the media community, media freedom has been abused unabatedly. Although the GJA is the umbrella body, there are other professional bodies like the Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana (PRINPAG), which is an association for private media, and this draws a clear-cut line between them and the rest of the media fraternity, which seems to question the allegiance of members to the parent body GJA. This shows that there is a category of journalists who do not see the GJA code of ethics as their *own*, and thus do not observe it. This is confirmed by the comment below:

> Now there is multiplicity of media outlets but freedom of the media goes with responsibility. Well, freedom has been abused and it will continue to be abused in certain sections of the society where even some of the private media houses do not belong to the members of the Ghana Journalist Association and therefore do not follow the ethics of the GJA. (Participant 2*)*

> The GJA has developed a 17-item code of ethics. However, the association is not adequately able to control members who largely continue to disregard its own code of ethics with impunity. Another problem is that many journalists are not familiar with this code of ethics, which makes its existence unimportant. (Participant 12)

According to Participant 12, though the GJA has documented its own ethical codes, two major issues explain why it does not have the intended impact. Firstly, the association lacks any formidable control mechanism to check operation of its members; secondly, many members are not conversant with the code. Thus, although the code is in place, it is not beneficial.

Despite the above concerns regarding ethical standards in the media environment, another respondent argued that the media has not in fact taken undue advantage of its independence and even deserves additional privileges. The participant further explained that the current system empowers Ghana's media regulator to ensure high professional standards and is preferred to dictatorial directives that stifle freedom to publish. According to the respondent, the current media atmosphere is ideal:

> I won't say on any day that the media has abused it[s] freedom. I think that the freedom we are enjoying could even be more. The truth is that this is far, far better than dictatorship. Can you imagine, the NMC being given power to censor newspapers? And then you have a dictator who comes to be NMC chairman and try to gag every media house and say that:

> "You! I don't like your nose", "You! Don't publish", can you imagine what would happen? So, I think this climate is better than anything you can ever get. (Participant 7)

Considering the fact that some journalists in Ghana are not conversant with the code of ethics (see Participant 12 above), Participant 14 explained that the GJA has made strides but more is expected of it. The participant sees unethical practices in the media landscape as inevitable. Some interventions to ensure high standards include organising training courses, and boosting morale and appreciating professionalism in journalism through an annual awards scheme. However, in all these, funding tends to limit the operations of the GJA, as the response below indicates:

> GJA has done so many things but I am the first to admit that it is not enough. You will get irresponsible journalists but you don't cut their heads off, but through education, education, education it gives them exposure … How do you ensure this? It is through intensive train-ing and workshops and its organisation is not easy because you need to [make it practical] and that costs money. Also, the GJA awards journalists who have excelled. (Participant 14)

Furthermore, another respondent (Participant 2) established that professional journalism could be ensured if, firstly, all members of the media fraternity collectively observe the laid down ethical codes; and, secondly, if they become active members of the GJA. Thirdly, the media should be responsible in its reportage because unethical practices have resulted in huge fines for libellous offences. Lastly, publishers should verify infor-mation obtained before publication. The following response affirms this:

> I believe strongly that once we continue to be regulated and then we submit ourselves to the ethics and all of us also join the professional body, there will be discipline. Currently, the abuses are too much. People publish anything at all and when they are sent to court for libel and defamation and are fined, they find it difficult to pay. Also, some of them are folding up as a result of these practices and I think we need to be very responsible because the media is very powerful; therefore, what you [as] the editor do not want to be done to you, you should not do to your neighbour … One needs to cross check and not just go out there to publish to mar the image of individuals or organisations. (Participant 2)

Regulatory Body Effectiveness

This theme examined the role of the media regulatory body, which in the case of Ghana is the NMC, in issues of media standardisation and professionalism. The National Communications Authority, a body that deals specifically with broadcast media, was not considered in this paper because the focus of this work is on the print media. Participants generally indicated that there is a regulator for the Ghanaian media, however, the perform-ance of the regulator was assessed differently:

> The NMC organises workshops and has developed a number of guidelines on broadcast-ing, print, publication of rejoinders, political and election reporting standards. These guidelines have helped to open up people's understanding of most of the issues so people are more empowered and predisposed to appreciate and understand the nuances of the things they publish, and it has helped very much. For instance, *Daily Graphic* has published its own standards to guide their journalists in terms of

professionalism, comportment, relating to the public, openness, and plurality and diversity of opinions that they publish. (Participant 1)

The above participant established that the regulator has laid a foundation upon which good ethical standards and professionalism thrives. Thus, journalists in general have access to reference documents on the do's and don'ts of practising journalism in print media in Ghana. This serves as an education manual to help journalists operate within the confines of ethical journalism. Beyond NMC's ethical guidelines and training seminars, some print outlets like *Daily Graphic* have published internal standardisation structures to guide their writers.

However, other respondents identified other factors that they believe the NMC has neglected, beyond the publication of guideline documents by the NMC. This is affirmed in the following response:

I think the NMC has done very little in instilling or improving the standard of media in Ghana. Their usual excuse is that they do not have enough resources to undertake all the things they will need to do. They have done little. Actually, the self-upgrade, self-improvement is purely private or individual media houses tend to help their own journalists to improve their standards. It has nothing to do with the NMC. (Participant 3)

This respondent noted that the Commission has not done enough to ensure high media standards on the pretext that they do not have all the needed resources to execute their functions. Improvement of professional standards is solely the responsibility of media outlets, without any assistance from the regulator. A participant remarked:

The NMC has good intentions but has not been efficient in enhancing media standards in Ghana. The NMC is highly under-resourced. An example hereof is the fact that the Commission does not even have a website. This is very unfortunate, taking the constitutional mandate of the Commission into consideration. For now, there is no effective self-regulatory body in the Ghanaian media system. Furthermore, many media houses do not have internal standards for reporting. This means that ethical and professional violations are not sanctioned. (Participant 12)

Participant 12 explained the NMC has not met the expectation of enhancing professionalism in Ghana, although this is the ultimate goal. This respondent underscored that the Commission lacks basic materials to function effectively and their under-resourced state becomes evident in a situation such as where the Commission has had no Web presence since the end of 2014. Moreover, from the view of the respondent, the media environment in Ghana lacks a "working regulator" coupled with the fact that several outlets do not own internal ethical guidelines. This allows flouters of ethical codes to go unpunished.

Participant 15 noted that the regulator irons out media disputes through its settlement committee to ensure that such cases do not enter the courts where severe sanctions are handed down to offenders. However, some aggrieved persons (defamed by said media outlet) bypass the Commission's Complaint Settlement Committee and seek redress from the law courts. *The Enquirer* and *Daily Guide* newspapers were fined astronomically for defamation. The following comment sheds light in this regard:

The first call of media infractions should be the NMC. The NMC has a dispute resolution platform called the Complaint Settlement Committee which sits on complaints.

> However, there are some individuals who would go to the courts with their cases. The Complaint Settlement Committee was set up to help ease the pain journalists would suffer if they were taken to the law court. But where there are excesses and individuals whose reputation have been damaged they do not go to the NMC and report at the court; it has never been easy for journalists. This is because there was an instance where *The Enquirer* had to suffer for damaging somebody's reputation. Recently, the *Daily Guide* has also suffered because they were taken to court and asked to pay huge sums of monies. (Participant 15)

Another participant observed some media practitioners and their outlets do not accord the NMC the respect it deserves as a regulator, let alone adhere to its directives. Media practitioners did not take up an invitation by the Commission to meet to resolve infractions, following a complaint against some media outlets/journalists. Furthermore, the participant sees the establishment of the Commission as an opportunity which the media fraternity should take advantage of, but some journalists disregard it. Thus, many aggrieved parties resort to the courts to present allegedly slanderous or libellous cases. This is evident below:

> Well, there is no way I can defend any newspaper or media organisation that is taken to court. I am saying this because we have a regulatory body, the NMC, that all of us are supposed to respect. We have a situation where some of our members refuse to report to the Complaint Committee of the NMC. Any individual, corporate body, or government for that matter, or its appointee has the right to take any media house or practising journalist to court and whatever punishment that the court gives out, I am not in the mood to actually defend any of the media houses because luckily we have a regulatory body in place and it is our duty to respect it. (Participant 13)

Failure of some practitioners to allow their own regulatory system to regulate them led participant 12 to comment that: "The democratic functions of the media are indirectly limited by the threat of libels. Almost all libels in Ghana are filed by politicians, using this as a means to silence the media. However, sometimes the libels are actually relevant, because the media are of very low quality and give non-validated statements". From the view of this informant, the media seems to propel interferences that emanate from society, especially the political class, due to their occasional publication of unsubstantiated claims.

Money Matters

This theme explored bribery and corruption in the media environment, particularly whether, and how, it compromises media independence. Generally, participants noted that money matters cannot be ruled out in most of the media's day-to-day dealings. The following response attests to this fact:

> There are some journalists who will just tease out if they have a negative story, maybe about a politician, so the person will come and pay them and they will drop the story. We also have instances of reporters coming with [an] explosive story against a public official or politician and their editors "will sit on the story"; that means they will not publish it. I know of one instance where a reporter did that and the editor refused to publish the story but rather went to the subject of the story and collected some money. Now, this reporter went behind the editor's back and released it to a private media [*sic*] to publish it. The

subject of the story went back to the editor and collected his money leading to some kind of confusion. It is not very common but it does happen. (Participant 9)

The above response shows that bribery/corruption is evident in the media system but it is rare. Some editors shelve stories to compensate for favours received in the form of cash. Furthermore, other participants presented similar but different perspectives of bribery and corrupt practices:

> Yes! Bribery is real and it is rather common. Lately there have been some incidences where it came out that leading journalists had taken sides in public debates after having been paid. (Participant 12)

Participant 12 also explained that corrupt practices in the media sector are very visible where media practitioners accept money to suppress facts. Furthermore, Participant 5 pointed out that bribery occurs frequently within the landscape, but not all journalists indulge in that practice. He recounted a situation where a bribe to discontinue a story was personally turned down. The response below attests to this:

> I believe very much that this practice happens. There have been some instances [in which] I have been approached not to do a story and take some cash instead but [I] declined it. A lot of these things happen. I don't only read about them happening, but I know personally from experience. (Participant 5)

In Ghana, organisations that invite the media to their programmes normally give some form of appreciative gifts. Although these, in the respondent's view, are not bribes, they contribute towards the final content published. However, in the event of a ground-breaking story, journalists do not trade-off their personal reputation to publish the story for the firm's gift:

> It is a little bit of a mixed-bag. In our environment there is something we call honorarium or if you like *soli* [solidarity] where media operators attend programmes and after the event, especially promotional programmes, they are given some form of transportation or allowance. Probably, the company giving out such hand-outs is doing that in the hope of influencing the content but from my experience, such honorarium goes to influence the content that the journalist would eventually churn out. If the subject is a controversial one, the journalist will always give priority to selling news content [rather] than what the company might want to bury because if the news content is going to "hit" and make the journalist "popular or boost his profile", the journalist will go for that news content despite the fact that he is being greased in the palm. (Participant 3)

Discussion

This paper has attempted to explore the factors responsible for unprofessional media practices in the print media industry, and to consider the degree to which these determine their independence under the Fourth Republic. The current work showed that four major subjects underpin unethical behaviour and unprofessionalism in the Ghanaian print media, namely the educational level of practitioners; a sense of belonging and recognition of professional association(s); a weak regulatory body; and money matters. In terms of education, this work's finding reflects the position of Karikari, who observed:

> The emergence of media pluralism and the entry into journalism by so many people lacking professional training, in several cases even of people with very low education, is one principal source of the generalised weak professional quality. The range of violations is wide, varying in form and content with many implications for media credibility, growth and expansion of media freedom, and for enhancement of the respectability of the profession. (Karikari 1996, 145)

In Ghana, where the review of newspaper content by broadcast stations is pervasive, the transfer of unethical practices from print to the airwaves is inevitable. Nyarko (2016, 6) describes it as "recycle of inter-media perpetuation of foul content emanating first from the print, then to the broadcast, and finally online". Furthermore, this study revealed that in as much as there were laymen in the field of media, there were equally trained media practitioners who do not go into mainstream media because it is not lucrative. This situation is consistent with what occurs in Mozambique. Marcelina Alves, a panel member in a "Seminar on Education and Training in Journalism and Communication", noted that several models exist but each country is unique in the context of its socio-cultural and economic tendencies. According to Alves, the prevailing market is in itself a major obstacle confronting an ideal model for journalism training in Mozambique. She identified that media outlets have low employment vacancies coupled with unappealing, meagre salaries which do not entice people to work there or train in this field. Reasonably trained journalists exist, but due to poor remuneration, many are not practising journalism, which means that the sector tends to be dominated by persons with no formal training. Thus, Alves deduced that a "closed circuit is created: on the one hand there are poorly trained journalists who can only produce bad journalism, but on the other hand, one cannot have good journalism without a development of the media companies and these can only develop if they have good professionals" (Namburete and Mario 2001, 16).

Furthermore, in Africa, poor journalism is attributed to the lack of professional training for most practising journalists (Nyamnjoh 2005, 95). Similarly, the most important hindrance in India's journalism is the total lack of training on ethical and professional practices which has impacted accuracy and privacy (Rao and Johal 2006, 298). In contrast, Belsey and Chadwick (1994, 1) were of the opinion that "Journalism is an honourable profession, and many of those who should care for it, often including its own professionals, have dishonoured it". David Newton, Director of the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), which trained the majority of the Ghanaian journalists, concurs: "I am very much aware of the enormity of the problem. We need to be assisted to enable the institute to deliver to the best of its ability and turn out the calibre of journalists many governments have yearned for" (Sarpong and Safo 2002). For Friend and Singer (2015), in our world today, many people are in the business of publishing, but not necessarily journalists. Thus, it is necessary to establish structures that ensure only trained media professionals practise journalism to forestall possible entry of laymen to the profession to enhance good standards and to reserve available jobs for the qualified practitioners. This has been made possible in Rwanda under a new promulgation that prevents media firms from hiring unqualified journalists (IREX 2010).

The study further showed that the roles of professional associations and regulatory bodies were paramount to the extent to which standardisation and professionalism can be ensured. In Ghana, membership to the parent organisation, GJA is voluntary amid the existence of many officially registered media professional associations. This leads to split memberships and split allegiances. Also, Ghana's regulatory body has not done enough

to regulate the media environment to ensure its Constitutional mandate of high journalistic standards because it lacks the needed resources. These are consistent with other studies that have pointed out: "In looking at ethics, it should be noted that a code would not be effective if there is no enforcement machinery. So, it is not only important to have ethical codes in place, but also consideration should be given to mechanisms of ensuring that these are observed" (Nassanga 2008, 649–650). The implementation of ethical codes itself has been tiresome because there is no "exclusively identified group" that journalists are associated with. In the majority of professions other than media, the licence-issuing body is usually also responsible for ensuring compliance with professional conduct and tends to be a statutory body backed by law (Nassanga 2008, 651). This position contrasts sharply with the current standing of the GJA that does not issue licences to its members, let alone have formidable legal backing, and with pockets of professional associations that have fragmented membership. Moreover, remuneration for journalists in Ghana is not the best, so some outlets have a high rate of staff turnover. Sarpong and Safo (2002) observed: "A high turnover rate within the profession has had the effect of pushing young, inexperienced hands into positions they are professionally unprepared for, as the experienced ones leave out of frustration because of poor remuneration". It is rather more tedious for public officials to deal with a well-informed and trained media professional cadre who is aware of its role (Ross 1999, 23) and this helps to ensure independence of the media.

Both the GJA and NMC have implemented codes of ethics and made strides to deal with issues of ethical practices in the Ghanaian print media, but their shortfalls were summed up by Essilfie-Conduah (2014, 9) in his article captioned "The NMC and this 'Toothless Bulldog' Jibe [1]". The article was in relation to the case of the *Daily Guide*, a private newspaper that published the photograph of the mortal remains of P. V. Obeng, a former minister of state, at the mortuary. He noted that "surprisingly the *Daily Guide* newspaper rejected being sanctioned and told the Commission, GJA and all to 'shut up' after both organisations came out to issue statements on the unprofessional publication". Ethics Committees and Associations in Rwanda, for instance, have conducted training on ethical issues but implementation of the codes has proved unsuccessful (IREX 2010). Lack of observance of ethical codes on a broad scale on the continent might have informed the position of Guy Berger when he wrote in the May 3, 2012 edition of the *Mail & Guardian* online: "If we don't want unethical behaviour to infect African journalism, we should urge media houses to embrace the African Media Initiative (AMI) Principles as a guideline framework".

Bribery and corruption in journalism have been recorded in most parts of the world and this study showed that the print media in Ghana is no exception. When money changes hands with regards to certain articles, this means: (1) trivialising the truth, (2) magnifying the truth, (3) misinforming the public, (4) compromising the profession's integrity and, lastly, (5) compromising the media's own independence of working in an environment without fear. Whenever money is at the forefront of a media practitioner's mind, society should expect diluted content which invariably worsens unethical and unprofessional tendencies. Skjerdal (2010) records that although approved journalistic ethical codes of most countries in Africa (such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Ivory Coast, Liberia, South Africa, Benin, Zambia, Niger, Congo, Mali, Botswana, Uganda, Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya, Cameroon and Ghana) clearly forbid bribery, the practice is still on-going. Consistent with this, Sarpong and Safo (2002) cited an instance where a Ghanaian state-owned press dismissed its reporter after he entered into negotiations with an Indian entrepreneur to bury a "negative story" allegedly surrounding maltreatment of a Ghanaian worker, for a fee of GH₵500.00 (about

US$720.00 at the time). The entrepreneur recorded the deal secretly for a radio station to air. "Brown envelopes" and "freebies" are inducements known extensively in the media world today and they tend to impact negatively on editorial independence (Skjerdal 2010, 370; Lando 2013, 24). This view is consistent with this study that bribery in journalism is common because "brown envelopes" and "freebies" have their own specifically Ghanaian equivalent known as *soli* (solidarity). The complexities that surround the definition of "money exchanging hands" in the media circles as "gifts" from corporate event organisers question the ability of journalists to satisfy the principles of balance, fairness and objectivity to publish a critical story about them. This shows that sometimes censorship is self-inflicted by journalists themselves rather than by an external body. In India, journalists cited poor salaries as the major contributing factor that makes them behave unethically and this seems likely to stop if their conditions of service are improved (Rao and Johal 2006, 297). Similarly, the Rwandan media has an ethical code but most of the journalists do not respect it and they receive "gifts" and request "bribes" from clients to publish a positive story or shelve negative news. Also, media practitioners compromise their ethical codes because of poor salaries and even disrespect by journalists themselves for the profession (IREX 2010). According to Belsey and Chadwick (1994, 1), media owners often employ this medium to acquire wealth and power for their own gains and "as for journalists, they do not even need to be bribed to behave unethically".

Presently, lapses in the observance of ethical codes and standards make unprofessionalism evident in the media landscape in Ghana. Sections of the Ghanaian print media have abused the privileges that the repeal of the Criminal Libel Law brought and these have provoked legal summons against the media, especially by the political class. This is consistent with the position that irresponsible reporting of journalists has warranted official interference which they have capitalised on to suppress media freedom (Kasoma 1997, 295; Nyamnoh 2005, 59). Thus, some sections of the media in Ghana need to come to terms with the fact that, in as much as ethics can be used to boost building a resilient professional media, it can equally be used to repress press freedom and freedom of expression if not adhered to (Nassanga 2008, 660). Furthermore, professional behaviour not only enhances the self-esteem of journalists but more importantly dictates how the public and the government regard them. It toughens and shields journalists against all forms of governmental interferences, ranging from the imposition of state-composed press councils, and official registration among other media restraints (Ross 1999, 23). Professionalism will be instilled in the Ghanaian media environment if all journalists and media outlets subject themselves willingly to their own ethical codes which will also lead to a curtailing of the legal cases brought against them.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

REFERENCES

Asante, Clement. E. 1996. *The Press in Ghana: Problems and Prospects*. Maryland: University Press of America.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. "Quality and Inequality." *The Guardian*, December 29. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/dec/29/books.guardianreview2.

Belsey, Andrew, and Ruth Chadwick. 1994. "Ethics and Politics of Media: The Quest for Quality." In *Ethical Issues in Journalism and the Media*, edited by Andrew Besley and Ruth Chadwick, 1–14. London: Routledge.

Bertrand, Claude-Jean. 2000. *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.

Christians, Clifford G., Shakuntala Rao, Stephen J. A. Ward, and Herman Wasserman. 2008. "Toward a Global Media Ethics: Theoretical Perspectives." *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 29 (2): 135–172.

Essilfie-Conduah, Nana. 2014. "The NMC and this "Toothless Bulldog" Jibe [1]." *Ghanaian Times*, May 26.

Fereday, Jennifer, and Eimear Muir-Cochrane. 2006. "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5 (1): 1–11.

Friend, Cecilia 2015. "Introduction: Traditions, Conventions and Ethics." In *Online Journalism Ethics: Traditions and Transitions*, edited by Cecilia Friend and Jane B. Singer, 3–15. London: Routledge.

Friend, Cecilia, and Jane B. Singer. 2015. "Introduction: The Practice and Promise of Journalistic Ethics in a Digital World." In *Online Journalism Ethics: Traditions and Transitions*, edited by Cecilia Friend and Jane B. Singer, i–xxiii. London: Routledge.

Gadzekpo, Audrey. 1997. "Communication Policies in Civilian and Military Regimes: The Case of Ghana." *Africa Media Review* 11 (2): 31–50.

Ghana Journalists Association. 2011. *16th GJA Awards-Giving Impetus to Democracy and Development in Africa: The Role of Investigative Journalism*. Accra: Innolink.

Ghana Statistical Service. 2010. *Population and Housing Census: Summary Report of Final Results*. Accra: Sakoa Press Limited.

IREX (International Research Exchange Board) 2010. *Media Sustainability Index: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Africa*. Washington, DC: Westland Enterprises.

Karikari, Kwame. 1996. "Media Ethics and Promotion of Democratic Culture." In *Ethics in Journalism. Case Studies of Practice in West Africa,* edited by Kwame karikari, 141–153. Accra: Ghana University Press.

Kellam, Marisa, and Elizabeth A. Stein. 2014. "Silencing Critics: Why and How Presidents Restrict Media Freedom in Democracies." Prepared for Presented at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública e de Empresas, (FGV/EBAPE) October 29, 2014.

Kasoma, Francis P. 1994. "Media Ethics or Media Law: The Enforcement of Responsible Journalism in Africa." *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 15 (1): 26–42.

Kasoma, Francis F. 1995. "The Role of the Independent Media in Africa's Change to Democracy." *Media, Culture & Society* 17: 537–555.

Kasoma, Francis P. 1997. "The Independent Press and Politics in Africa." *International Communication Gazette* 59 (4–5): 295–310.

Kripendorff, Klaus. 2004. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications.

Lando, Agnes L. 2013. "Media Ethics in the Kenyan Media?: Understanding the Disconnect Between the Classroom and Practice." *African Journal of Communication* 1 (1): 15–42.

Mahama, P. Y. 2012. "Political Communication and Ghana's Democratic Development." *African Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (4): 103–113.

Mfumbusa, Bernadin F. 2008. "Newsroom Ethics in Africa: Quest for a Normative Framework." *African Communication Research* 1 (2): 139–158.

Minnie, Jeanette. 2001. "Journalism and Self-Regulation." In *Handbook on Journalism Ethics: African Case Studies*, edited by Chudi Ukpabi, 25–40. Amsterdam: Media Institute of South Africa.

Mukhongo, Lynete L. 2010. "Can the Media in Africa Shape Africa's Political Future?" *Journal of African Media Studies* 2 (3): 339–352.

Mupfurutsa, Hilda V. 1999. *"'Ethical and Professional Issues in African Journalism", Africa Media" Debates*. (pp. 107–17). Grahamstown, South Africa: Rhodes University.

Musa, Bala A., and Jerry K. Domatob. 2007. "Who Is a Development Journalist? Perspectives on Media Ethics and Professionalism in Post-Colonial Societies." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 22 (4): 315–331.

Namburete, Eduardo, and Tomas V. Mario. 2001. *Seminar on Education and Training in Journalism and Communication in Mozambique: Final Report Drawn Up for the Media Development in Mozambique Project, 1–64*. Maputo: UNESCO/UNDP Media Development Project. http://www.mediamoz.com/journalism/semeng.pdf.

Nassanga, Linda G. 2008. "Journalism Ethics and the Emerging New Media Culture of Radio Talk Shows and Public Debates (Ekimeeza) in Uganda." *Journalism* 9: 646–663.

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2005. *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books.

Nyarko, Jacob. 2016. "Newspaper Review Show in the Broadcast Media Space in Ghana: An Exploratory Qualitative Study." *SageOpen*: 1–10. doi:10.1177/2158244016654954.

Polkinghorne, Donald E. 2005. "Language and Meaning: Data Collection in Qualitative Research." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52 (2): 137–145.

Rao, Shakuntala, and Navjit S. Johal. 2006. "Ethics and News Making in the Changing Indian Mediascape." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 21 (4): 286–303.

Rao, Shakuntala, and Seow T. Lee. 2005. "Globalizing Media Ethics? An Assessment of Universal Ethics Among International Political Journalists." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 20 (2–3): 99–120.

Ross, Lindsay. 1999. *The Independence of the Commonwealth Media and Those Working Within It*. Commonwealth Press Union. http://cpu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/The-Independence-of-the-Commonwealth-Press.pdf.

Sarpong, Sam, and Amos Safo. 2002. "Obscenity, Poor Quality Besiege Ghanaian Media." *Africannews*, January 7. http://web.peacelink.it/afrinews/70_issue/p5.html.

Sawant, P. B. 2003. "Accountability in Journalism." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 18 (1): 16–28.

Skjerdal, Terje S. 2010. "Research on Brown Envelope Journalism in the African Media." *African Communication Research* 3 (3): 367–406.

Teer-Tomaselli, Ruth E. 2001. "Investigating Media Training in a Period of Political and Economic Change." In *Seminar on Education and Training in Journalism and Communication in Mozambique*, 40–64. Maputo: UNESCO/UNDP Media Development Project. http://www.mediamoz.com/journalism/semeng.pdf.

Tettey, Wisdom J. 2006. "The Politics of Media Accountability in Africa: An Examination of Mechanisms and Institutions." *International Communication Gazette* 68: 229–248.

Tomaselli, Keyan G. 2003. "Our Culture" vs "Foreign Culture": An Essay on Ontological and Professional Issues in African Journalism." *International Communication Gazette* 65: 427–441.

Wasserman, Herman. 2010. "Freedom's Just Another Word? Perspectives on Media Freedom and Responsibility in South Africa and Namibia." *International Communication Gazette* 72: 567–588.

Whitten-Woodring, Jenifer. 2009. "Watchdog or Lapdog? Media Freedom, Regime Type, and Government Respect for Human Rights." *International Studies Quarterly* 53: 595–625.

Jacob Nyarko (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Department of Graphics, Takoradi Technical University, Ghana. E-mail: jacobnyarko2015@gmail.com

Ruth E. Teer-Tomaselli, Centre for Communication & Media Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. E-mail: teertoma@ukzn.ac.za