

Challenges in Practicing Objectivity and other Ethical Issues in News Reporting: The Case of Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN)

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Abstract: This study explores journalists' view on factors that affect their implementation of objectivity and other ethical issues in the context of the Oromia Broadcasting Network. The study was conducted based on qualitative data produced through in-depth-interview. The data used for the study were gathered from 17 purposely selected practitioners of OBN based on their experiences in the organization. The analysis was established through social responsibility theoretical model which implicates to the loss of audiences as a result of the lack of objectivity and other ethical issues. The findings revealed that objectivity and other ethical issues in the OBN were given less attention in the news gathering, processing and reporting because of three major factors. The first one is professional issues that emanate from the shortage of journalistic trained manpower and lack of journalists' independence. The other one is pressure groups that directly or indirectly affect objectivity and other ethical issues. The final one is the issues of news verification and selection of credible sources. Hence, practicing objectivity and other ethical issues have been challenges due to the various factors that influence their implementation.

Keywords: Ethics; Journalism; Media ownership; Objectivity; OBN

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1. Introduction

The notion of objectivity was originated from the occupational values of American journalism as the norm that guides journalists to separate facts from personal feeling, and that journalists can stand apart from the real-world events (Schudson, 2001; Hackett, 1984). To Schudson, objective reporting is supposed to be cooler, rather than emotional, in tone and takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in political controversies. It is about the possibility of distinguishing between facts and opinions which emerge from the positivistic way of understanding the concept of objectivity that advocates a journalist to write what she/he can directly observe and that which is factual. That means the journalists must keep their own opinions outside of the products that they present and allow the audiences to form their own opinions on the basis of the facts. On the other hand, objectivity is the concept of free speech that rests between correctness, reality and thought because truth will win falsehood (Streckfuss, 1990; Tuchman, 1972). “The truth-value of a story no longer depends exclusively on the stance of an individual reporter as an independent, neutral, detached and skilled observer” (Lesage & Hackett, 2014: 44). Thus, objectivity can be considered as a core tenet of journalism ideology (Borger, Hoof and Sander, 2016). However, objectivity has a problematic status in journalistic practices due to the impossibility of value-neutrality through the positivist assumptions in the journalist’s ability to represent the world as it is without affecting it (Umeogu and Ojiakor, 2012).

On one hand, ethics is the analysis, evaluation and promotion of what constitutes correct conduct and virtuous character in light of the best available principles (Ward, 2009). Journalism ethics is a species of applied media ethics that investigates what individual journalists and news in general should do as per the ethical guideline to play their role in a society (Adam, 2010; Ward, 2009). Ethics is the principles of journalistic rights and responsibilities. Some of the ethical principles, according to Jacquette (2010: 213), include “plagiarism, freedom of the press and problems of censorship and withholding information for the greater public good, journalistic respect for privacy, protection of confidential sources, objectivity, news reporting perspective and bias, and editorial license and obligations”. According to Ward (2009: 297), “a major task of journalism ethics is to determine how existing norms apply to the main ethical issues such as accuracy and verification, independence and allegiances, deception and fabrication sources and confidentiality” Ethical issues in journalism are very important in a socially responsible media organization. However, these ethical issues in journalism can be affected by either internal or external influential bodies. A journalist, who is like the information house as the eyes and ears of the whole citizenry, particularly needs to be ethically active so as not to misinform the public. In order to not misinform the public and be objective in their reporting, reporters should verify information they obtain from sources.

Objective journalists are committed in the sense of having ethical commitments and being engaged in society. But, objective journalists are not advocates of specific causes; objective reporters are not willing to compromise their standards, e.g., to distort the facts to achieve their ends. Second, objective journalism can and should co-exist with other journalistic styles and traditions (Ward, 1999:8).

Several studies have indicated that objectivity and other ethical issues in journalism are in serious problems in different mass media outlets. Objectivity is the state or quality of not being influenced by personal bias, prejudice, feelings and opinions (Ayodele, 1988). In professional journalism, following the objectivity norm helps journalists to exclude personal views and values from their reporting (Broersma, 2010). Hence, objective news-reporting is that which is devoid of inferences, judgment and slanting. Within the democratic societies, the idea of trying to be balanced, fair, truth or objective in the mass media is a reasonable working standard. However, the lack of objectivity in presenting news may arise from the journalist's personal idiosyncrasies, personality and aspirations (Ayodele, 1988). However, the standard of objectivity according to Boudana (2011) is a serious challenge not only in the developing world, but also in the developed world and highly democratic societies because it is considered an achievable standard. McQuail (1992) argued that objectivity is the denunciation of poor practices, thus eventually revealing that implementation is the real problem. According to Hargreaves (2003), journalists are expected to maintain public trust in addition to report accurately and objectivity is part of the ethical decision-making in journalistic practices that determines how much the public can trust journalists. Within the socially responsible newsroom, maintaining objectivity and ethical issues are very much crucial. They are not optional but underpin the practices of journalism (Tanner, Phillips, Smyth, and Tapsall, 2005).

Maintaining this ethical decision-making and objectivity within the long history of the monopoly of the ruling parties over the mass media in Ethiopia has been a serious problem. Eshetu (2012: 3) confirms that “complaints about the media bias, inaccuracy, unfair treatment, invasion of privacy and so on are continually increasing with stricter control and regulation of the press and broadcasters in Ethiopia”. These practices have their own contribution in the today’s query of ethical elements of the media (such as objectivity, impartiality, balance, and fairness). Due to less attention given to objectivity and other ethical issues, Ethiopians are still riddled with different types and manner of ethical maladies. The practitioners are also willingly or unwillingly affected by the repentant situation. Therefore, this study is believed to have a positive contribution towards furthering our understanding of how Ethiopian journalists, reporters, editors and managers are concerned about the things that affect objectivity and other ethical issues. It specifically focused to explore the factors that affect journalistic objectivity and other ethical issues in Ethiopia. The study can also shed light to media laws and media policy formulation and implementation in the media outlets in Ethiopia.

This paper is based on the social responsibility theory. According to the social responsibility theory, the losses of ethical standards in media outlets have implications on the losses of media’s social responsibility. This theory holds that the media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust and news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant in order to be socially responsible (McQuail, 2010). The theory also emphasizes the responsibilities of the media in packaging the contents of media based on the social reality (Asogwa and

Asemah, 2012). Hence, this theory was adopted for this work because it mallets on the journalistic principles upon which journalists operate. Prominent in this principle is the issues of objectivity and other ethical issues in news reporting. According to this theory, journalists should be objective when presenting a given news story meant for the consumption of the masses. The theory addresses that objectivity is an attempt of journalists or reporters to avoid injecting their personal opinion into any news story they are assigned to cover. The theory also involved a view of media ownership as a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than as an unlimited private synchronization. Hence, social responsibility should be reached by self-control, without intervention (McQuail, 2010).

To some scholars, the requirements of objectivity make it possible for sources to manipulate the news and only serve to conceal bias, whether this is intended or unintended (Akpan, Ifeanyi, Martin, Alexander, and Uchenna, 2012). Objectivity has its own elements, which include balance and even-handedness in presenting different sides of an issue, accuracy and realism of reporting, presentation of all main relevant points, separation of facts from opinion, but treating opinion as relevant, minimizing the influence of the writer's own attitude, opinion or involvement and avoiding slant, rancor or devious purpose (McQuail, 1992).

Objectivity is all about factuality and impartiality. Regarding factuality, it has two main aspects: the first aspect is the form of reporting, which deals with events and statements that can be checked against sources and are presented free from comment. This involves truthfulness of events such as completeness of an account, accuracy, and an intention not to mislead or suppress what is relevant. The second aspect of factuality is 'relevance', which involves the process of selection rather than in the form of presentation (Nordenstreng, 1974; cited in McQuail, 2010). Relevance means that reports are substantially complete, contain the most important facts and address the most important issues. 'Informativeness' is another criterion of objectivity, which refers to qualities of informational content to improve the chances of actually getting information across from an audience: being noticed, understood and remembered. The main information quality requirements are: comprehensiveness of relevant news and background information about events in the society and the world around. Information should be objective in the sense of being factual in form, accurate, honest, sufficiently complete and true to reality, and reliable in the sense of being checkable and separating fact from opinion. On the other hand, impartiality can be categorized as the news presentation of balance and neutrality. Impartiality relates to absence of bias and objectivity to identifying facts and evidence (Hackett, 1984). Balance in this context refers to the coverage of the inclusion of all essential parties and all the existing supply of information or judgments of relevance whereas neutrality is the absence of identifying with or rejecting the subject of the report.

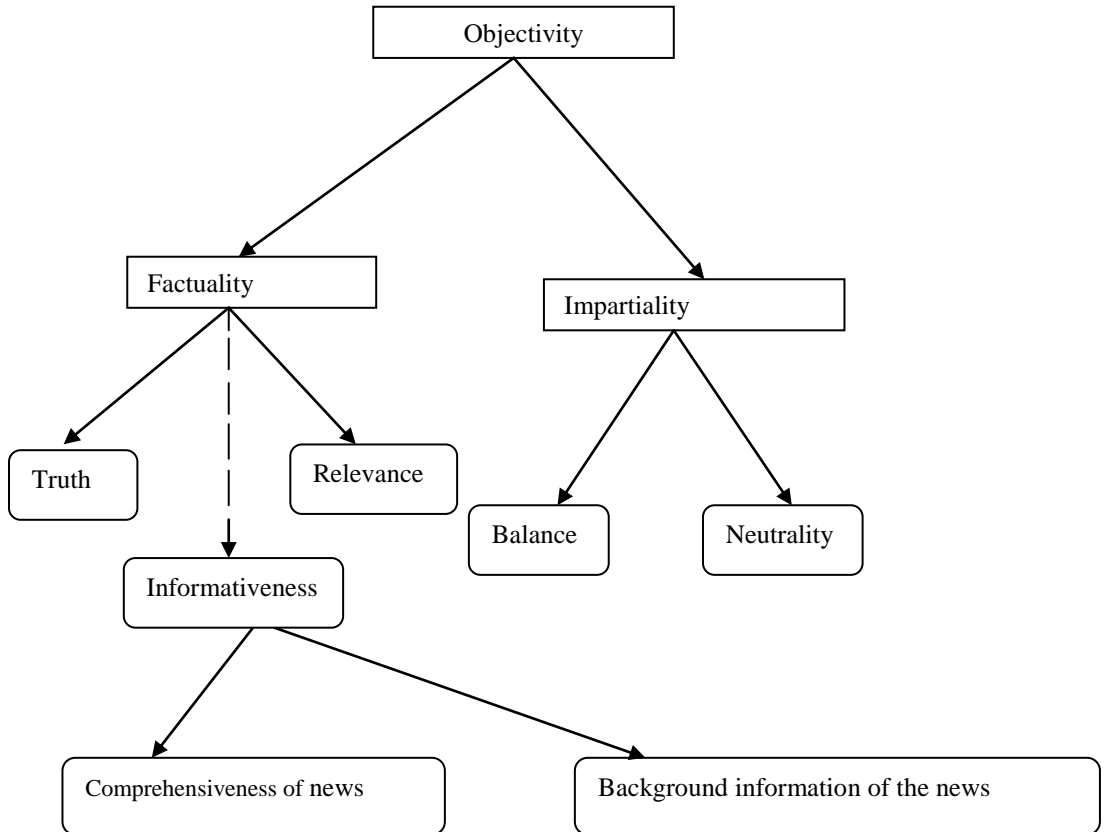


Figure 1: Component criteria of objectivity

Source: Adapted from Westerstahl (1983)

The norms of factuality and norms of impartiality in the context of Ethiopian media outlets can be affected by two forms of censorships: the self-censorship practitioners and the systematic censorship of the governments. Self-censorship is conceptualized as the withholding of journalistic practice due to the perception of external pressure (Skjerdal, 2011) whereas systematic censorship is contextualized as the indirect influence of the government over the media outlets (Ross, 2010). As a result, any information disseminated to the citizens of Ethiopia is biased or completely violates the citizens' right to freedom to receive factual and impartial information. However, the editorial policy of Ethiopian mass media makes clear that the foremost aim of the state media is to serve the public and recognized journalistic principles such as accuracy, fairness, balance and protection of sources are maintained as nonnegotiable values (Skjerdal, 2011). Article 29 of the 1995 Ethiopian constitution (also guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press without any censorship although this constitutional law is partly restricted by the two repressive Ethiopian press laws: the Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007 and the Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information No. 590/2008. Through these repressive press laws, the government strictly controls over the content of the media (Tura, 2008). These strict control and handful of the government over the press in Ethiopia,

brought about problems such as partiality, bias, unfairness, subjectivity, inaccuracy, imbalance, and sycophancy generally termed unprofessional and unethical reporting (Eshetu, 2012). This unethical reporting in turn has resulted in subjectivity in the mass media and has abided the social demand news type of media outlets. Thus, the contemporary practice of media in Ethiopia is mainly ridden by the interest and ideology of the ruling party that causes hardship in media objectivity and other ethical issues. This may be because the government of Ethiopia has not yet granted complete freedom of press and has kept its eyes on the practice of media (Meshesha, 2014). This loss of ethical elements may cause loss of audience interest in the media in Ethiopia.

The factors that devalue journalistic objectivity and other ethical issues in Ethiopia are rarely studied and given little attention. Hence, it is highly demanding to carry out further studies in the field to explore factors that devalue objectivity and other ethical issues in the Ethiopian media context. This helps to show up how the social accountabilities of the media houses in Ethiopia in line with the global media ethics, constitutions and media laws are being practiced. As a result, it is important to study the journalists' views in practicing objectivity and other ethical issues in the OBN. The major importance of this study is that it helps partisan policy makers, media owners and media practitioners to understand how the lack of ethical standards affects journalistic objectivity and other ethical issues in the Ethiopian mass media in general and OBN in particular.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Description of the Study Area

Oromia Broadcasting Network was established in April 2011 by the direction of Oromia Regional State proclamation number 164/2011 (Kenea, 2018). First, it was established as Oromia Mass Media Organization in July 2006 and later as Oromia Radio and Television Organization in 2007 by Chaffe Oromia Proclamation Number 113/2006. According to the Office of Chaffe Oromia's Proclamation Number 113/2006, the main aim of its establishment is to encourage the people to freely express their opinions based on the constitution of the federal government and that of the Oromia regional state as well as other laws and policies of the country. It is also hoped to create conducive condition for the people of Oromia region to get clear, objective, adequate, quality and timely information; work towards the creation of national consensus on major national and regional issues. The other aim was to make endeavor towards developing democratic culture in economic, political and social activities; and finally strive towards the promotion of Oromo culture, history and language (Kenea, 2018; Adane, 2012). Oromia Radio and Television Organization (ORTVO), now OBN, is situated in Adama and financed by the regional government (ORTVO Magazine, 2010).

2.2. Research Design

This study has employed qualitative in-depth interview. In order to identify challenges in practicing journalistic objectivity and other ethical issues of OBN,

journalists were purposely reached. Gathering data by using interview technique provides an opportunity for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss issues in detail. It is also an appropriate tool to understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006). As a result, qualitative research design was used to investigate the factors that influence objectivity and other ethical issues in OBN in processing news events.

2.3. Data Collection Technique and Procedure

The study attempts to explore the factors that impede objectivity and other ethical issues within OBN through investigating the views of reporters, editors and managers of the news organization. It deals on how the practitioners select news, news sources and their news interpretation through in-depth interview of the respondents. The interview approach is mainly chosen to identify the factors which influence the practice of objectivity and other ethical elements in OBN. Thus, this paper deals with place of objectivity and other ethical components of OBN practitioners through what they cover, how they cover and why they cover news within the framework of journalism's codes of ethics by interviewing the practitioners. According to Kvale (2006), this kind of interview helps to understand the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world. Flick (2009) notes that in order to successfully carry out such interviews, the researchers should depend on the interviewer's situational competence that may be increased by practical experience of making decisions necessary in interview situations. Hence, the researcher applied the interview technique to collect data from OBN journalists, editors, media managers and reporters.

2.4. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Purposive sampling technique was made to select interviewees from the OBN practitioners to achieve the objectives of this research. Accordingly, ten journalists, four reporters, two editors and one manager (with a total of 17 individuals) were purposely selected based on the experiences they have in the organization and were interviewed to gain specific information about objectivity and other ethical issues. Respondents with a minimum of three years experiences in the organization were purposely considered for the interview. The interview was aimed to assess the journalists', reporters', editors' and media managers' perception on the factors that hamper objectivity and other ethical issues in news reporting.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data obtained through the qualitative in depth-interview were analyzed by categorizing the respondents' views in three major themes. These three major themes that were the challenges in practicing journalistic objectivity and other ethical elements are: professional issues, news source credibility and pressure groups.

The interviews were first conducted in *Afan Oromo* and then translated into English for the purpose of this study. The transcribed interviews were analyzed qualitatively by identifying and dividing them into their central themes.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings and results of the study on the factors that devalue objectivity and other ethical issues are thus presented in terms of the following three major categories: professional issues, source credibility issues and issues of pressure groups.

3.1. Professional Issues

The criteria for professionalism seem to fall into three broad categories: knowledge, organization, and autonomy. Knowledge refers to the notion that a profession is connected to a specialized body of knowledge and to a specific, non-ambiguous domain of skill and expertise; formal knowledge is generally acquired through special education (Örnebring, 2010). However, many of the Ethiopian journalists, reporters and editors in the state media until recently have not had a bachelor's degree or diploma qualification in journalism education, but rather they were from Language, Literature and Theatrical Arts qualification background (Olana, 2014). Hence, the use of professional standards of journalism can be generally considered as low, due to inadequate standards of training, lack of quality control within the media until recently. Even there was no higher education level of journalism training available in Ethiopia until 2003 and journalists have been unable to obtain basic journalism skills training until very recently which may contribute to the today's obstacles of objectivity and other ethical issues.

On the other hand, organization refers to how a profession may require membership of professional associations that legitimately represent the profession as a whole, how practitioners must be able to earn a living from engaging full-time in their profession, and how formal codes of ethics organize the profession.

And autonomy, finally, refers to such things as professionals being able to do their job with a great amount of individual discretion, that professional standards and professional sanctions should be decided within the profession rather than outside it, and that external influences over the work process itself should be non-existent or minimal (Örnebring, 2010). Regarding this issue, one of the interviewed reporters said:

Maintaining objectivity and other ethical issues within our media organization is really difficult as per the norm of the journalism profession. Because editors/gatekeepers used to tell us what we have to write or not to write, how we have to write due to some sort of both internal and external factors such as politician interests and business person interests. Even we cannot think about professionalization since editors and managers urge us to work according to the needs of the ruling parties rather than the way the public demands. Undoubtedly, the situation can distort truth and I can say objectivity is highly devalued (April 12, 2016).

In the professional news reporting process, journalists and editors should neither omit facts of major significance nor should they include essentially irrelevant information at the expense of significant facts. They are also expected not to consciously or unconsciously mislead or even deceive the audience, and hide their biases or emotions behind. Therefore, when journalists report news, they should present making themselves neutral. Unless and otherwise lack of thereof leads to the practices of undermining the objectivity and other ethical issues resulting in wide

practices of producing fictional and biased news. From the above extracts of the interview, we can understand that the final products of the outlets are not merely based on the journalists' professional work but also based on other influential bodies through editors/gatekeepers in a position. This means that the interventions of editors in the news organization up to what the journalists should write and how they should write do not only rely on the journalists' own professional knowledge because of either editors themselves or other influential bodies behind them. This shows that there is no professional autonomy that can allow journalists to use professional principle through which journalists produce news without intervention.

Almost all of the journalists witnessed that gatekeepers such as editors, chief editors and managers of the media outlets directly or indirectly influence reporters or journalists to include or exclude original information obtained from sources (Adane, 2012). News passes through process and practitioners must carefully understand this process in order to produce truthful, balanced, objective and impartial news. The process of gatekeeping is important because it includes selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news within the circle of professional experts that may include reporters, editors, editor in chief, managers, sources, media owners, and sometimes advertisers. Although gatekeepers provide a picture of the world for the rest of us, it is vital for scholars to understand the gatekeeping process and its impact on the reality presented to the public (Shoemaker, Vos and Reese, 2009). McQuail (2005) elaborates the importance of gatekeeping in deciding which information goes forward to the audiences and which not. However, these gatekeepers sometimes order reporters to the extent of sources selection during news gathering which affect professional principles of journalism. Merely relying on gatekeepers' order, reporters' interview of the selected source and report the news on the basis of predetermined angles by the media outlet may devalue objectivity and ignore other ethical issues. Such unprofessional and excessive interventions of the gatekeepers may still create ethical and objectivity problems to a greater extent.

Journalists can demand professional supports from the side of organization which may include training and other skill development mechanisms that contribute to their professional development. OBN does the same for its newly recruited journalists in order to practice in the way their organization demands rather than aiming at the enhancement occupational profession of the journalist. The following interview quote from interviewed OBN radio reporter confirms similar argument.

When I initially joined the news media organization, I did not possess necessary journalistic skills and it was not easy to contest [act] within the norm of the profession due to lack of experience. But through progressive practices, I was able to maintain news experience with in the profession. I had mentor there who used to tell me what I have to do in news processing. So, I was only driven by the order of gatekeepers who are in position and assign what I have to cover and whom I have to interview (April 13, 2016).

From the excerpt of the above interview, it can be understood that there is a professional gap on one hand and organizational influences on journalists on the other hand. Implicated in the interview is not only about receiving guidance from

gatekeepers but also external force that can change journalistic practice in to the way the organization demands through the mentor. However, in professional journalism, objectivity and other ethical issues for social responsibility are the fundamental principles of the emerging profession because human beings reasonably seek and distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong information. Hence, journalism as a profession is a matter of “safeguarding” the practitioners’ legitimacy in providing neutral, balanced and objective news. Journalism reporting requires a certain method of selecting, gathering, and presenting of news information, which is being acquired formally from educational institutions, and informally in professional organizations and in the work place though there is no doubt that it is a mastery profession (Olana, 2009). Professional standard and values, ethical rules of reporting, prioritization of job aspects, and the image of audience-how journalists view their audience are indicators of journalism as a profession. In the interview above, the view of the journalist was the lack of autonomy in producing news independently without intervention. That means, the journalist did not have the sole right in news gathering and reporting using own professional skills. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), journalists must follow professionalism and obey the duties of their profession’s skills or crafts and ethics of journalism. Reporters or journalists should not have been merely relied on the gatekeeping direction but they should have been guided by their profession norms of journalism. In general, the issue of professionalism and profession is undeniably important to maintain objectivity and act according to the ethical code of conduct of the media. This enhances objective performance well enough and its practice helps to increase public credence and trust both in the information and also in the opinions which the media offer. The media themselves find that objectivity gives their own news and product a higher and wider market value.

3.2. News Verification and Source Credibility Issues

Sources have a great role in objective news reporting in the profession of journalism because they provide crucial information in the practice of journalism (Rudin and Ibbotson, 2002). The information released by media professional can only be trusted if the source is attributed (Adane, 2012). According to Dary (1967), sources are the ones who supply information and that information must be accurate, current, and reliable in order to be objective news to affect the lives and interests of the general public. Hence, without relying on different sources, reporters should not write and report news based on their own assumptions. To McQuail (2005), objectivity basically requires a fair and non-discriminatory attitude to sources and to objects of news reporting, all of which should be treated on equal terms. Most of the interviewees said that their news sources are government officials because they believe that they give them genuine information and they are more credible sources than other sources of information. This does not mean all information is credible. Furthermore, the respondents witnessed that some government sources deliberately gave them false information either to favor their own political interest or the political situation that does not allow criticism against the government on the required event.

In similar vein, Campbell (2004) notes that sources have the power to manipulate the media contents and they may divert the media attention into their political interest if journalists are not seriously handling in accessing information. The following quote from interviewed journalist shows that they always trust and use government officials as source of information for their media outlet without no or little attribution.

I always use and trust government officials as credible source. I do not suspect them that they tell the public wrong information. Especially, senior sources are believed in providing credible and trustworthy information. On contrary, we informally hear that our audiences do not always trust government officials rather they need to hear confirmed source of information from public, private sectors and even private persons. However, most often we do not have the opportunity to attribute sources and we simply tell the events to the audience (April 12, 2016).

In connection to this idea, Woolever (2002: 44), who advises journalists to verify information they get from one source, says "Once you have the information in front of you, the next step is to decide if a source is appropriate". He also urges that journalists must directly go to the people who are the subject matter like experts, and he emphasizes that one-sided nature of news which does not add the opposite, neutral views is poor argument or report. Even if journalists suspect as officials may give untrustworthy information, they fear to crosscheck from other bodies. However, in profession practices of journalism, Hadland (2005) recommends that journalists should check and double check every fact and every allegation. It is also important to attribute sources in a professional way because it helps journalists or reporters to maintain objectivity. In this reflection, source attribution again helps to establish the credibility of news events. However, according to Potter (2006), all information in the news, for example, information that is observed by reporters or journalists and facts that are known to the general public do not need attribution. With the exception of journalists' or reporters' eyewitness or involvement cases, the sources of all information should be attributed properly. Unless it is properly attributed, it causes for the declining of journalistic objectivity. Selection of credible sources is, therefore, an important criterion in evaluating the accuracy, balance, impartiality and credibility in an objective and ethical news reporting. Almost all interviewed respondents confirmed that it is difficult to cross check and balance events related to development issues which interest the government and the sources of the events are government officials. They also witnessed that it is a must to cover such issues even if it may not interest the public. If you do not cover as it is said by the government officials, you will be fired from your job. In principle, the reporter should use reliable sources who can give the reality so that they can be trusted by the society. If their reports do not reflect their own idea, they cannot be committed to impartiality. However, Fedler, Bender, Davenport and Drager (2005), comments that news stories must be objective and free of bias. He also says journalists are expected to gather information from all necessary bodies and report the factual information because the news report needs more than contacting two or three sources. According to Hadland (2005), even if triple source stories may sound like a lot of work, they need to be balanced as well. You need to apply the discipline of verification in order to separate facts from

opinion. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001:71), ‘the discipline of verification in journalism is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction or art’ and its first focus is about getting what happened downright. Hence, impartiality and objectivity have been what separate journalism from propaganda, entertainment or fiction (Sambrook, 2012; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001).

Nevertheless, most newsrooms do not have sophisticated systems in place to cross-check the contents provided by users. One director admits: There are no professionals dedicated specifically to monitoring content. Verification is widely considered to be at the heart of the occupational ideology of journalism. The process of determining the facts traditionally took place in newsrooms, away from the public eye, as journalists considered conflicting reports, weighed up incoming information and made decisions on what to publish (Hermida, 2012).

3.3. Issues of Pressure Groups

Pressure which is conceptualized as anything exerting influence from various groups clearly acknowledges impairing journalists’ judgment and compromising objectivity (Mare and Brand, 2010) may come from external sources, but often from within the media organization.

3.3.1. Political attitude

The media in Ethiopia have gone through the political twists and turns under the pressure of the political interest throughout their establishments. Ross (2010:1048) says, “While Ethiopia gains respect in the political scene, the government struggles to justify its draconian control over the media”. Hence, it can be said that the media and politics in Ethiopia are highly intertwined. Meshesha (2014) confirms that Ethiopia has experienced sharp twists and turns in its political history where the country has gone through the imperial and semi-feudalistic regime followed by socialist military regime of the *Dergue* to the present evolving democracy. Therefore, the mass media in Ethiopia is still politically affiliated to the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party in the name of developmental journalism. Nevertheless, it is only a free and independent press that can play a key role in exposing biases and raising general awareness of its detrimental effect upon society, as well as in promoting integrity and accountability norms, values and practices in society. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) confirm that the society always demands truth and only a press free of government censor could tell the truth. On the other hand, it is often observed that in the context of Ethiopia, the efforts made by journalists or reporters in selecting themes that can attract audiences is assorted with a certain degree of pressure resulting to the detriment of less newsworthy to audiences. One of the editors interviewed admits that the existence of certain pressures on media outlets within or outside the media organization through editors or behind them. One other journalist witnessed that editors and top managers of their media outlets reflect ideas that represent the government’s point of view rather than the mass audiences. This practice can discourage journalists or reporters from publishing objective news and

may lead to a form of self-censorship and distorted information to the public. The existence of media that is free from any political pressure/influence has great advantages for a society. One TV journalist witnessed:

I know that I'm not implementing what I have learned in collecting, processing and reporting news stories because editors and managers direct me towards to the issues that interest them or the ruling party. I am biased only because of external and internal pressure groups. I do not have full right to select the source or events by myself. They are often selected by our editors or gate keepers in the different position. In reality, our news events are sometimes deliberately distorted. Our news stories are mainly focused on the political agendas most often in the name of development journalism. For example, I remember when I was urged to report events that have little correspondences with the realities on the ground. I feel that I made a mistake only because of the interest of the pressure groups which actually contradicts principles of journalism in practice (April 12, 2016).

As we can see from the above text, it can be understood that the journalists feel that they are jeopardizing ethical standards of journalism in the process of every news gathering, processing and reporting because of pressure groups. From the respondent's view above, one can understand that there is omission or ignoring of facts in the events reported through the television screen. That means, it was only based on individuals' interest or one-sided story that was deliberately distorted ignoring the social reality. Gatekeepers in different positions within the media organizations are among these pressures that influence reporters when they are pushed by government officials. The reporters' reflections are in line with Shoemaker *et al.* (2009) comments that gatekeeping decisions are made on individual subjectivity that erodes objectivity because they leave rooms for channels and external pressures. In general, every journalist is cutting so many corners on truthfulness, often with pressure from editors, that one's conscience gradually is hardened (Mpagaze and White, 2010). It is clearly indicated that the reporter interpreted the news story by excluding about facts in order to reflect certain ideological perspective or particular political spin. However, in reality objective news reporting should be free from political coalitions. It is more than just ending formal political alliances and external control from influencing the news (Kaplan, 2010). Thus, pressure groups can be the major impediments (Hackett, 1984) to objectivity and make journalists, editors, reporters, managers to operate in unethical manner in the news organizations in developing countries like Ethiopia. The argument embodied in this reflection is that journalists must maintain objectivity by verifying information they obtain from sources and by reporting news stories that do not reflect their own personal opinions and without excessive interventions. Thus, in Hermida's (2012: 661) view, "journalist as the verifier of news and information is at the core of journalism as a system of knowledge production and central to a structural claim to expert status and statement of authority." Verifying information is not only important in maintaining objectivity but also important in the principles of ethics in journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). In attempting to avoid all subjective judgments and analysis, the journalists must strive to become a rigorously impartial, expert collector of information (Kaplan, 2010). Because citizens require true information about the state of their nation and region in order to "directly involve in creating a new

government and new rules for the political, social, and economic life country” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 16).

3.3.2. Ownership issues

Ownership structure is another issue in the question of objectivity and other ethical issue in media institution. Media practitioners are not like employees of other companies but they have a social obligation that can actually override them (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). “The ownership structure of the media is likely to have an effect on the potential for undue influence on media reporting by either the government or private interests” (Transparency International, 2013: 4). Ownership can directly or indirectly affect objectivity in mass media messages. Almost all of the respondents argued that the largest percentage of media companies/industries in Ethiopia is government owned and their reporting is often biased in favor of the government and less effective than private media outlets. Hence, OBN is not free from biases of ownership structure. According to the views of some interviewees, practitioners are considered as the property of the media organization. As an interviewee expressed:

Within the state media, there is pressure from government bodies including OBN. In addition, within the private media, there is pressure from the business group. In such intervention of ownership structure, impartiality, objectivity and ethical utilization would be difficult. This can cause news stories to be unfair and unbalanced. But, I know that as a journalist, the interest of the owner should not come first. By principle, journalism’s first loyalty must be for citizens. If I cannot do what is said by the owner through editors, I will be in jail/fired soon in the context of Ethiopia. Hence, I sometimes intentionally or unintentionally distort news stories in order to report the way my editors and my organization needs the news story. Nonetheless, I agree that news stories must be reported without any distortion. However, within our media organization, the principles of journalism, editorial policies and newsroom guidelines are often on the paper not in practice.

That is why I blame myself for being a journalist in Ethiopia (April 12, 2016).

The implication of the view of this respondent is that both state and private owned media are often criticized for their susceptibility to ownership structure. From the above interview, we can understand that it would be very difficult for the journalists not to report only in the way their editors or organization needs the news story as they can be punished or/and fired from the organization. It means that they deliberately distort the news story for the sake of organizational satisfaction rather than audience interest. As a result, the journalist must obey and respect the words of gatekeeper even if there is a mismatch between the realities and what has been said. They cannot merely stand up behind ‘realities’ because of certain paternalistic sorts, most often from the side of state owned media. It is true that such excessive intervention and obligation in the news reporting leads journalist to self-censorship which has actually been prohibited by the country’s constitutional law article 29/2-3. Thus, we can say fear of punishment that may be imposed by the ownership structure is one of the challenges in implementing objectivity and other ethical issues in the media outlet. Literature also verifies that social responsibility of media organization can be affected by both the state and private media outlets. The state media are often affiliated with political pressure, lack of professional journalism, and poor-quality

programming as a result of both political interest and business interests (GSDRC, 2010). In addition, the media ownership and powers behind them are often not transparent and can affect the operations and integrity of the media that may lead complete or partial to lack of objectivity. This idea posits the fact that the media control and political power are concentrated in the hands of the elites in the context of Ethiopia. As neither the government nor private media owners should have control over the media, there is a need to move away from state-controlled media, encourage media pluralism through a variety of competitive media outlets. Whether private or state owned, there is a need for media organization or journalists' professional organizations to lobby media owners to recognize principles of editorial independence to ensure freedom of information.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusions

The paper attempted to explore the views of journalists' on factors which influence the practice of objectivity and other ethical issues in news reporting of OBN. It also attempted to identify a number of limiting factors and various pressures to which journalists, reporters, editors, and media managers are subjected to process news events in unbalanced, unfair, partial and unethical manner. It explored how journalistic professional usage gaps, credibility of source selections, various pressure groups and ownership structures of media impede objectivity and other ethical issues in the news process which the society demands. The findings of the study involve social responsibility theory which implicates losses of media's social responsibility as a result of denunciation of objectivity and ignorance of other ethical elements. According to McQuail (2010), the roles of the socially responsible media are basically to provide true, accurate, balanced, relevant and objective information to the general public.

The factors which influence objectivity and other ethical elements include professional implementation, source credibility issues, pressure groups, and ownership issues were perceived as having key influences in the news production process. The lack of information verification from various sources within the media outlets was also crucial issue that influences the views of journalists in practicing objectivity and other ethical issues. Thus, the study argued that objectivity should be based on certain standards of interpretations and analysis rather than absolute standards that completely ignore commenting and playing the public watchdog roles of journalists. The practitioners should not be affected by the interferences of politicians, owners and lack of self-reliance in deciding source selection and news verification. Objectivity and ethical components in journalistic practices within the OBN are generally in the realm of pressures, constraints, and obstacles that resulted in less commitment and responsibility to the public. The fundamental argument of the study is that ethical standards of journalistic practice, such as objectivity and other ethical issues, are the key elements in the practice of journalism but excessively influenced by various factors in the actual practice within the newsrooms.

Journalists can be objective by reporting stories that are balanced, verified and responsible for the public by selecting diversified sources, taking care of their personal idiosyncrasies, following the ethical guidelines, and taking a neutral position from pressure groups.

The absence of news verification can make audiences discouraged. Both deliberate distortion of truth (for the sake of ownership interest) and absence of news verification may offend the audience and make the media organization lose its credibility. Source credibility may have a substantial role in outlining the journalistic borderlines between versions and facts, truth and “truthiness,” objectivity and bias, trust and skepticism (Schudson, 2001). Hence, the standards of source credibility shape the capacity of the press to produce truthful, accurate, fair, unbiased accounts of news and protect themselves, their organizations and eventually their consumers of erroneous information. In developing countries, where the media often face major challenges in the form of lack of training and technical skills, low professional standards, inadequate legal frameworks and an undemocratic political system, objectivity and other ethical issues in the media are likely to further undermine the role that the media can play in fighting so irresponsible reports and promoting public accountability. The study posits that media organization should urge journalists to apply their profession and to avoid the domination of political views or the views of external and internal pressures through gatekeepers and excessive intervention of ownership structure.

4.2. Recommendations

OBN needs to improve the journalistic practices in general and objectivity and other ethical elements in particular. Based on the findings of the study, I recommend the following actions to be considered by the government, owners, practitioners and politicians.

Reporters, editors and managers in the OBN should ensure that journalistic objectivity and other ethical elements are properly considered at every stage of journalistic practices (production, processing and reporting news). They should be devoid of individual subjectivism when analyzing and interpreting news items. Practitioners should be professionally well-equipped and capable of defending excessive influential bodies (politicians, owners and elites) that contribute to denounce objectivity and other ethical issues. Journalists, reporters and other media practitioners in OBN should be independent from reporting politically affiliated news that misleads the public and gives them distorted information. Journalists should be fairly independent from what they cover and report.

OBN should develop a standardized code of ethics that provides and enhances journalistic ethical practices and profession roles and responsibilities. As Kruger (2004) noted, journalists' primary duties are not for themselves but for their citizens. Code of ethics helps the practitioners to manage the media outlets in line with journalistic principles of ethic such as accuracy, balance, fairness, credibility and socially responsible media products. As some scholars in the field of journalism argued, although there are organizational and ownership structural constraints that

characterize the practices of journalism, journalists cannot escape out of the detractors of socially determined view of the world (Boudana, 2011). As a result, OBN needs to be free from pressure groups that may jeopardize the quality ethical issues such as political interests and ownership structures. These political interests and ownership structures should not be constraints for journalistic objectivity and other ethical elements rather they should support them by providing them various capacity building trainings and workshops so that they can develop confidence to write or report fair and balanced stories for their media organization.

OBN needs to appreciate using various sources of information in order to verify the news rather than merely relying on government officially dominated sources of information. It means, seeking a greater diversity of sources in stories, and telling such stories from the perspective of non-dominant groups and includes issues of social justice and their historical context.

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