

Managing Ethical Dilemmas under Stressful Economic Circumstances among Journalists in Northern Ghana

This article explores the management of ethical dilemmas in stressful economic circumstances among journalists in the three Northern Regions of Ghana. It analyses the experiences of journalists during difficult ethical moments. In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 30 working journalists, drawing 10 from each of the three northern regions. These are the Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions. The study revealed that in practice, rather than working with the normative ethical framework defined by the codes of ethics of the Ghana Journalists Association, journalists are influenced by context-based pragmatism and their conduct is very much influenced by economic realities of satisfying basic needs. Again, the study revealed that most Ghanaian journalists understand the idealism of ethical norms and are very much aware of the GJA code of ethics, but see the practicability of the code as problematic. We recommend that the GJA increases its advocacy role on improving the working conditions of its members. It should also facilitate continuous professional development programs on media ethics in the changing media landscape. Improved working conditions and continuous professional development programs can assist its members in managing ethical dilemmas in stressful economic and social circumstances.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemmas, Ethics, Journalism, Stressful Economic Circumstances, Ghana.

Introducing the Problem

In recent times, the Ghanaian media landscape has witnessed some dramatic news of job cuts, and voluntary retrenchment of media workers. Media General, owners of the TV3 Network, has between August and October 2018 reduced its staff by about 125, notably affecting its Onua FM and 3FM units. GN Media and TV Africa have all in recent times reduced their workforce for the poor performance of their media industries and this has attracted the attention of the

1 Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA) (Myjoyonline 2018). This
2 national trend is in keeping with international trends. What makes the Ghanaian
3 experience remarkable is that the global trend is just beginning to affect the local
4 media industry. In the wake of these developments, job insecurity in an already
5 precarious media labour market is likely to affect the quality of professionalism
6 among journalists in Ghana, with dire consequences in northern Ghana where the
7 media economy is in a distressed state due to low advertising market (Alhassan
8 et.al 2018). It is against this backdrop that we undertook a study on how journalists
9 manage ethical dilemmas under stressful economic circumstances.

10 Media and communication ethics are important in promoting transparent and
11 accountable governance in modern democratic societies. The media and journalists
12 in any country are believed to be strong ally in shaping and forming the opinion of
13 the population. In light of this, ethical questions are therefore tied to the core
14 practices of journalism, and journalists are required to make sound moral decisions
15 and judgements in their daily journalistic practices. However, quite often,
16 journalists are confronted with dilemmas out of which they have to make
17 decisions.

18 Professional associations with defined codes of ethics are self-regulatory
19 mechanisms aimed at disciplining members to act within the law and moral norms
20 of a given society. As Andrew Puddephatt puts it: “Self-regulation preserves
21 independence of the media and protects it from partisan government interference”
22 (Puddephat 2011, p. 12). It is in this regard that the GJA has been active in
23 reminding its members of the ethical boundaries of their practices. In a recent rare
24 case where a member was proven to have used blackmail to extort five million
25 Ghana cedis from the head of a utility service provider in Ghana in a bid to kill a
26 story, the President of GJA took the initiative to report the matter to the Ghana
27 Police for further investigation (Ghanaweb, 2018). The vigilance of the GJA on
28 matters of ethics speaks to an increasing national and public attention on moral
29 governance of media practice.

1 Among researchers, increasing attention has been drawn on the issue of
 2 ethical dilemmas in journalism and the corrupting influence of inducements. In the
 3 context of Africa, previous studies on media and communication ethics have
 4 focused on newsroom practices on the African media, journalism ethics, “soli”
 5 (brown envelop) among others (Karikari, 1996; Hasty, 1999; 2001; Kasoma, 2009;
 6 Chari, 2007; Freres, 2001; Berkeman et al, 2003, Skjerdal, 2010). Again, a lot of
 7 these studies have been devoted to the potential negative effects of unprofessional
 8 journalistic practices and how it threatens development reporting (Kasoma, 2009;
 9 Diedong, 2008). For instance, through case study, historical summaries and
 10 illustrations, Berkeman et al. (2003) discussed ethical dilemmas and challenges on
 11 online media practices such as: sourcing, intellectual property rights and conflict
 12 of interest in Zimbabwe. The study by Berkeman et al., highlighted ethical
 13 dilemmas faced by media professional who were engaged in online media
 14 practices in Zimbabwe. Again, Lohner et al. (2016) revealed that in Kenya,
 15 environmental journalists and editors are often faced with the dilemma of whether
 16 to pursue a story which they know is of public interest, but critical to an influential
 17 source and therefore risk being fired, or ignore the story and negate their
 18 professional obligation.

19 In Ghana, following the liberalization of the media landscape, the media are
 20 now quite diverse and pluralistic (Alhassan, 1998). As a result, the growing public
 21 perception is that journalistic conducts are often unethical and unprofessional
 22 (Tetteh, 2012). This has resulted in a growing body of empirical and critical
 23 studies on journalism and ethics in the media (Tandor & Agbemenu, 2015; Tetteh,
 24 2012; Diedong, 2009). For instance, in his study of the “Impact of Brown Envelop
 25 Journalism on Journalistic Practice in Zambia and Ghana, Kasoma (2009) applied
 26 both surveys and in-depth interviews and analyzed the rampancy of the
 27 phenomenon in the two countries, and how journalists perceived the practice. The
 28 study revealed that brown envelope journalism was pervasive in both Ghana and
 29 Zambia.

1 While these bodies of research (Berkeman et al, 2003; Neverla et al, 2016;
 2 Kasoma, 2009) presented an excellent overview of the negative effects of
 3 unprofessional media practices, there is paucity of study on the ethical dilemmas
 4 journalists are faced with on their quest for making sound moral decisions in
 5 stressful economic circumstances in Africa. We define “stressful economic
 6 circumstances” as moments where an individual is faced with a spectre of want as
 7 he or she is challenged with meeting the basic requirements or basic needs of life
 8 for himself or herself and dependents.

9 For instance, a journalist with a monthly salary of about two thousand cedis
 10 (about 450 US dollars) undertakes an investigation of a banking fraud leading to a
 11 big story in which some senior bankers are involved. When a senior banker
 12 discovers that the publication of the story could end his career, he makes an
 13 inducement offer of fifty thousand cedis which is 25 times the journalist’s monthly
 14 salary to kill the story. He or she turns down the offer, saying it is unethical and a
 15 corrupt practice. On reaching home, the journalist is confronted with disturbing
 16 news that his or her daughter has been admitted at the hospital and needs an
 17 emergency surgery to save his life. The hospital is demanding a five thousand
 18 cedis down payment before the surgery. The journalist is unable to take a loan
 19 from the bank and has no health insurance that covers the treatment. Under these
 20 circumstances, should the journalist revert to the offer from the banker to kill the
 21 story and be paid an amount which is ten times what is required to save the
 22 daughter’s life? This illustration of “stressful economic circumstances” is a real-
 23 life story of a Ghanaian journalist. Facing a “limit situation”, in a Freirean sense
 24 (Freire 1972) as illustrated is not an uncommon experience for journalist working
 25 for low remunerations in northern Ghana. The question of whether to take the
 26 inducement or not plays out daily in the lives of journalists and other media
 27 practitioners in northern Ghana. The figure of 2000 Ghana cedis monthly salary is
 28 national case scenario. Journalists working with private sector media in the
 29 northern part of the country earn an average of about 500 Ghana cedis, yet is it

commonly known that it is highly insufficient to cater for the basic needs of a nuclear family.

The main purpose of this study is specifically, seek an answer to the question: How do journalists rationalize how they make sound moral decisions under stressful economic circumstances in Northern Ghana? This study will contribute to the existing literature on media ethics and moral philosophy. This area of study is important because on a daily basis, journalists are faced with decision making problems between two possible moral imperatives deontological or situational either of which may have its justification.

Conceptualizing Ethics and Ethical Dilemmas in stressful Economic Circumstances

Many attempts have been made to define ethics (Bentham, 2009; Fletcher, 1966; Karashani & Rioba, 2002). However, it can sometimes appear as nebulous and controversial as morality itself. To this end, Sanders (2003), defines ethics as the study of the grounds and principles for right and wrong human behavior. This implies a critical reflections and self-confrontation with the moral choices or actions that individuals make in their everyday activities. For instance, making a value judgment about the circumstances under which to accept a bribe and kill a story, and save a daughter's life because one is in a financially stressful situation, or turning down an offer, saying it is unethical and a corrupt practice because one wants to be objective and truthful in the discharge of duty as a journalist.

Again, ethics deals with the problem of choosing between different domains of life and assumes there is a real choice between different kinds (Karashani & Rioba 2002). This means that the study of ethics is not only limited to what constitutes good or bad actions, but making value judgments about individual actions. In addition, Frost (2011) asserts that ethics is a method of examining morality that permits decisions to be made when individuals are confronted with

1 particular issues bordering on moral dilemma. As mentioned early, journalism
 2 practice involves daily encounters with a range of issues that present ethical
 3 dilemmas for journalist who have to make sound ethical decisions. In connection
 4 with this, Merrill (2004) defines an ethical dilemma to mean a situation in which a
 5 difficult choice has to be made between two actions which present transgressing
 6 moral principles either of which is acceptable. Again, Karashani & Rioba (2002)
 7 observed that journalists have contractual duties as employees; professional duties
 8 as journalists; duties of responsibility to source, and the public. In all these
 9 contractual duties, the journalist's obligation to choose how he/she performs
 10 his/her duties may depend on the interest of the journalist or whom he/she feels
 11 most loyal towards. We add that apart from contractual duties to employer, to
 12 profession, to the public and to sources, journalists also have obligation to family,
 13 where they head a family. Similarly, Hulteng (1976) noted that journalists are
 14 serving multiple interests, thus, the public interest, the journalist's self-interest and
 15 the interest of the public and these multiple services inevitably lead to conflict of
 16 interest. This is partly because human beings by nature are selfish and egoistic. In
 17 this context, the egoistic agenda of some journalists tend to override their
 18 professional responsibility to offer honest and dedicated service to the public on
 19 whose behalf they enjoy the privileges of the fourth estate of the realm.

20 Moreover, Owusu, (2012) concludes that journalists have professional
 21 responsibility to stick to the truth and bound by the professional codes that are
 22 formed to uphold the truth. In this regard, journalists are supposed to adhere to the
 23 highest ethical standards in carrying out their professional duties. In addition,
 24 Retrief (2012) noted that most societies trust that journalists would not betray the
 25 professional codes that are formed to uphold the truth. However, being human,
 26 these professional codes of conducts are sometimes betrayed by some journalists.
 27 In connection with this, Nasidi (2016) revealed that journalists in Nigeria
 28 sometimes behaved contrary to the professional duty to uphold the truth. The study
 29 attributed this to the complexities of Nigeria as a country with multiplicity of
 30 ethnic groups, culture and religions which turn to make journalists from opposite

1 sides of these divides oppose each other in their practice and generating conflicting
2 journalistic values and ethical judgements.

3 In the context of Ghana, article 10 of the GJA code of ethics asserts that “no
4 journalist shall solicit or accept bribes or any form of inducement to influence
5 his/her professional duties” (GJA Code, 1994, p.3). This implies that the GJA
6 codes prohibit either accepting or demanding bribes to kill a story no matter the
7 circumstance. Contrary, Mannie (2010) pointed out that low salaries for media
8 staff are likely to breed corruption in the Ghanaian media. He further noted that in
9 a situation where journalists have low salaries and fear losing their jobs, being
10 ethical in reporting can be perceived as a lesser priority than making money and
11 complying with what is expected from them by their superiors.

12 Instructively, ethical theories are to be the foundation upon which ethical
13 solutions are harnessed to the overriding difficulties that are encountered by
14 individuals, journalists and other professional groups. These theories have been the
15 theoretical underpinnings that are determining what is wrong and right, and
16 providing guidelines concerning how to live and act in an ethical manner. For
17 instance, Nasidi (2016) enumerated some factors that are accountable for unethical
18 journalistic practices which included poor pay, technical knowledge, conflict of
19 interests, ownership pattern and control, pressure of the market, weak professional
20 regulations and loose organisational policies and control among others. These
21 highlighted factors arguably are pervasive particularly in many third world
22 countries leading to circumstances under which the professionalism of journalists
23 might be compromised.

24 Furthermore, counter to both individual and institutional influences are the
25 influence emanating from cultures and values. It can be fathomed that journalists
26 are part and parcels of a context under which they live and work which is
27 submerged under distinct cultures which turn to resonate and reflect their view
28 point. This according to Wyatt (2014), is discernible in the differences between
29 journalists from democratic jurisdictions and those from authoritarian states. They

both wear different ethical compasses and what is regarded as ethically approved way of conduct may appear in a different light in another context.

Ethical Theories and their Applications in Ethical Dilemmas in Stressful Economic Circumstances

Theoretically, different scholars have classified ethics differently. The most common classifications are: deontological ethics, teleological/consequential ethics and individualistic or subjective ethics (Sander, 2003; Barcalow, 1994; Merrill, 2004). In this study, we are going to focus on normative ethical theories and their applications in the context of ethical dilemmas in stressful economic circumstances in journalistic practices in Northern Ghana. Some of the ethical theories discussed in this study are: teleological/consequential ethical principles (situational and utilitarian ethical principles) where an action is judged based on its consequences, and the deontological ethical principle (categorical imperative), where the emphasis is placed on the notion of duty (Brown, 2011; & Sanders, 2003).

To start with, one consequential ethical theory is situational ethics. Situational ethics has been extensively discussed in Joseph Fletcher (1966) book, *Situational ethics: the new morality*. The theory holds that an action is considered ethical if it creates the greatest amount of love at the end of the action (Fletcher, 1966). Situational ethics is against absolutism (Titus et al, 1995, Fletcher, 1966). Thus, the application of codes of ethics, rules, adherence to general standards with few exceptions. In this context, situational ethics does not have absolute norms or standards, but a non-legalistic flexible application of the standards to each individual situation (Titus et al, 1995). Relating this philosophy to the study, the ethical value of reverting to the offer from the banker to kill the story in order to pay for an emergency surgery to save the journalist daughter's life, and rejecting the offer from the banker to kill the story because it is considered unethical and a

1 corrupt practice would be determined based on the situation, but not on the
 2 legalistic application of ethical standards or norms that are logically consistent
 3 with ethical codes, rules and regulations. Similarly, Fletcher (1966) further noted
 4 that an action is good so long as it brings love to the actors or the end must bring
 5 loving results to the actors. In this regard, when measuring an ethical decision, or
 6 situation, one must consider the desired end, the means available, the motive for
 7 acting and the foreseeable consequences (Fletcher, 1966). For instance, if reverting
 8 to the offer from the banker to kill the story in order to pay for an emergency
 9 surgery to save the life of the journalist's daughter will bring love to the journalist,
 10 the banker and the society, then accepting the bribe or inducement under the
 11 circumstances will be considered a good ethical decision. On the other hand, if
 12 rejecting the offer from the banker to kill the story and allowing his/her daughter
 13 to suffer from the sickness will bring love to the journalist, the banker and the
 14 society, then rejecting the offer will be considered a good ethical decision or
 15 judgement.

16 We find the principles of utilitarianism relevant to this study. The
 17 utilitarianism theory considers ethics as that which is designed to create the
 18 greatest good for the maximum number of people (Bentham, 2009; Rosen, 2003;
 19 Moore, 1903). Jeremy Bentham set out "*the principle that the greatest happiness*
 20 *of the greatest number is the measure of right and wrong*" (Sanders, 2003, p.32).
 21 Similarly, J.S Mill, is also credited for the principle of utility and the greatest
 22 happiness (Barcalow, 1994; Brunder, 1990). Mill shared the view that the greatest
 23 happiness of the greatest number should be the determining principles of human
 24 action. In this context, an action is considered right if it promises the most
 25 happiness to the greatest number of people (Barcalow, 1994). In connection with
 26 the case under investigation, on the one hand, if reverting to the offer from the
 27 banker to kill the story in order to pay for an emergency surgery to save the life of
 28 the journalist's son will promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of
 29 people, accepting the bribe under the circumstances will be considered a good
 30 ethical decision or judgement. On the other, if rejecting the offer from the banker

1 to kill the story and allowing his/her son to suffer from the sickness will not
 2 promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, rejecting the offer
 3 will be considered a bad ethical decision or judgement.

4 Furthermore, another consequential ethical principle is ethical egoism.
 5 According to the principle of egoism, "*human beings are motivated purely by self*
 6 *interest in all their actions*" (Barcalow 1994, p.54). This implies that what is
 7 considered a good ethical judgment ultimately rests on self-interest. The principle
 8 of egoism is opposed to ethical altruism. For the ethical altruists, the principle is
 9 that human beings should not be selfish towards the welfare of others (Barcalow,
 10 1994). In relation with the ethical egoism principles, if reverting to the offer from
 11 the banker to kill the story in order to pay for an emergency surgery to save the life
 12 of the journalist's son will promote the self- interest of the journalist and against
 13 the interest of the society; accepting the bride under the circumstances will be
 14 considered a good ethical decision to the journalist. Again, if rejecting the offer
 15 from the banker to kill the story and allowing his son to suffer from the sickness
 16 will not promote his/her self-interest, rejecting the offer will be considered a bad
 17 ethical decision.

18 Deontological ethics is opposed to the teleological/consequential approach to
 19 ethics. The deontologists disagree that results or consequences should be the only
 20 measure of whether an act is ethical or unethical (Rosen, 2003, Sanders, 2003,
 21 Barcalow, 1994). In this regard, deontologists believe in rules or principles based
 22 on reason, which provide stability in the moral order (Sanders, 2003). To this end,
 23 the German Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant developed his theory of
 24 the categorical imperative which is ascribed to the deontological ethical
 25 philosophy (Sanders, 2003 and Barcalow, 1994). The principle of categorical
 26 imperative holds that: "Act only according to the maxim by which you can at the
 27 same time will that it should become a universal law for all rational beings"
 28 (Sanders, 2003. p.31). This implies that human beings should act on the premises
 29 that the choices one makes for one self could become universal law for all rational
 30 beings. In this regard, the moral law should come from the individual and the will

1 to act should be consistent until it becomes a universal law. Similarly, Bruder
 2 & Kenneth, (1990) noted that for an individual to will his or her action to become a
 3 universal moral principle, the individual should act from good will. In other words,
 4 the action of the individual should be based on the will of the individual to act
 5 good no matter the circumstances and consequences. Applying this theory to this
 6 study, it will imply that if reverting to the offer from the banker to kill the story in
 7 order to pay for an emergency surgery to save the life of the journalist's daughter
 8 will be considered by the journalists as a good moral conducted, and will promote
 9 that principle as a universal maxim, it will be considered an ethical decision.
 10 Again, if rejecting the offer from the banker to kill the story and allowing his son
 11 to suffer from the sickness will not be promoted as universal principle, then it will
 12 not be considered as a good ethical decision.

13 In addition, the principle of categorical imperative asserts that "a person must
 14 always be treated as an end and not merely as a means" (Sanders 2003, p.31). This
 15 implies that all humanity is to be treated with due respect and dignity because
 16 human beings are rational beings, with the ability to think, autonomous and are
 17 their own ends. In other words, human beings should be treated as an end in
 18 themselves, but not as a means to an end because human beings exist in
 19 themselves. Relating this to the study, it implies that, if reverting to the offer from
 20 the banker to kill the story in order to pay for an emergency surgery to save the life
 21 of the journalist's daughter is considered as an end, then accepting the offer from
 22 the banker and killing the story will be considered a good ethical decision.

23

24

25 **Research Design: Selection of Interviewees**

26

27 Ghana has ten administrative regions, three of which are located in the
 28 Northern Savannah Ecological Zone. These three regions are Upper West, Upper
 29 East and Northern Regions. They are also noted as the economically depressed
 30 regions of the Ghana. We adopted purposive sampling technique in selecting our

1 interviewees. According to Yin (2003) purposive sampling is the deliberate choice
2 of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses. In view of this, all the
3 participants were purposively selected for the study. In terms of inclusion and
4 exclusion criteria, we included journalists who were willing to provide information
5 by virtue of their knowledge or experience on the topic. Again, we excluded
6 journalists who were not experienced enough in the practices of journalism and
7 were not willing to take part in the study.

8 In all, we interviewed 30 journalists in the three regional capitals of Northern
9 Ghana (Tamale, Bolgatanga and Wa). In each region, ten journalists were
10 interviewed. The journalists who were interviewed were given copies of the
11 interview-guide to go through the questions before the start of the interviews. We
12 asked questions based on the topics in the interview-guide, while research-
13 participants responded accordingly. The researchers were not obliged to follow the
14 interview-guide strictly; they could sway from one topic to another, but always
15 returned to follow the trajectory. Every interview session took between 45 minutes
16 to one hour. All the he interviews were conducted in June 2018 and were
17 audiotaped.

18 In any research, concerns about guaranteeing confidentiality, anonymity, non-
19 identifiability and non-traceability of the participants are paramount to ensuring
20 validity and quality of data (Denzin et al. 1994). In light of this, the purpose for the
21 study was explained to all the participants. The estimated duration of the interview
22 was indicated to each of the participant and each was also reminded of that
23 participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were given the option to
24 withdraw from the study at any stage should they so wish. Similarly, raw data in
25 the form of conversation transcripts were treated in a way that protected the
26 confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Where a participant discontinued
27 the interview, a replacement was found to make up the ten respondents per region.

28 Semi-structured face-to-face interview format was used. The interview
29 method enables gathering of narratives and reflections of the journalists

concerning the ethical dilemmas in stressful economic circumstances in their daily journalistic practices (Van Manen, 1990).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, noting pauses, emphases, hesitations, and gestures such as laughter. After the transcription, the data was coded through a process of open coding (Strauss, 1990). By this method, the authors read through the entire set of data several times and chunk the data into smaller meaningful parts, and label each chunk with a code. Again, the codes were used and compared with each new chunk of data with previous codes, so previous chunk data were labeled with the same descriptive codes. After all the data were coded, the codes were selected and grouped by themes. After the themes were identified, content analysis technique was used to identify the most important themes (Bryman 2004). The number of times each descriptive code occurred was ranked and the most important concepts were identified as the themes. The most important themes identified are:

1. Making sound ethical decisions under stressful economic circumstances in journalistic practice.
2. Situating Objectivity and truthful reportage in stressful economic circumstances.

Findings and Discussion

Our analysis identified situations where journalists were faced with ethical paradoxes in decisions making between two courses of action under stressful economic circumstances, and variations in the application of the set of agreed ethical principles under different situations and contexts. We present these findings below:

Theme One: Making Sound Ethical Decisions under Stressful Economic Circumstances in Journalistic Practice

Journalistic practice involves daily encounters with range of issues which might present ethical paradoxes, and could call for a quick, sound and rationalized ethical decision to be made by a journalist. To this end, the research participants were asked to share their experience concerning problematic situations which confronted them in the course of their professional practices. It turned out that most of the interviewees were quick to narrate their heroic moments of refusing an inducement and publishing the story. Here is typical of such responses:

I have had an experience where I discovered a rot somewhere in Ghana. Ee... eeh... I was offered an opportunity to take a huge sum of money to kill a story. I was not working in isolation; I was working with the editorial team. So when such things happened, you can't take decision on your own, you need to talk to your editor, you need to talk to your immediate boss about what is going on. Eee,.. in my case, I discussed the issue with my colleague to seek his opinion on the matter. After the discussion... he said to me... my brother if you think the offer is good, why not take it? I was confused. It was against my ethics. However, I thought of my survival and financial problems. Eeeh, again, I looked at the magnitude of crime against tarnishing the image of the person involved. Hmm... I thought of that, but I also thought of the ethical aspect of case and the welfare of society. Eee... eeh for me to kill such a story, I damned my financial predicaments and published the story.

JB's response has highlighted a decision-making problem between two courses of action. That is, either to report the true story and remains in financial difficulty, or abrogates the professional code of journalism, kills the story for the entire society to suffer the consequences. In this regard, by adhering to the professional standards and rejecting the offer of money to kill the story implies that the decision of the respondent was informed by deontological ethical considerations. In this case, rejecting the offer of money to kill the story was

1 meant to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people in the
 2 society, but not based on his own egoistic or selfish interest. Similarly, another
 3 scenario was presented to the journalists to assess their level of commitment to
 4 truth, fairness among others. The story was presented this way, "...you went home
 5 from work and realised that your ward has been taken to the hospital for medical
 6 emergency. The doctors are demanding a GHS 5000.00* down payment before an
 7 emergency surgery can be done to save your ward from death. You simply do not
 8 have the money requested, but you still have the option of going back to accept the
 9 GHS 50,000.00 cedis from the banker to kill the story, will you take the offer? In
 10 response, an interviewee RB expressed:

11

12 I have stated many times that based on the emergency nature of the case, I will take
 13 the money for the emergency surgery, but my story will never be different, the story
 14 will never be killed, it will be reported to reflect the reality.

15

16 The views expressed by interviewee RB does not only shed light on how
 17 situational factors can influence ethical decisions, but it has clarified how
 18 situational ethical values do not necessarily determine the legalistic application of
 19 ethical standards that are logically consistent with normative ethical principles
 20 such as truthfulness, fairness, objectivity among others. This understanding is in
 21 line with Fletcher's (1966) situational ethical principle where an action is
 22 considered ethical if it creates the greatest amount of love at the end of the action.
 23 In this regard, by accepting to revert to take the offer from the banker in order to
 24 pay for an emergency surgery to save the journalist daughter's life could be based
 25 on the circumstances, and the greatest amount of love it could create to save his
 26 daughter's life. Contrary, the submission of the research participant is not in
 27 keeping with Kant's ethical principle of categorical imperative. This ethical
 28 principle holds that individuals should "act only according to the maxim by which
 29 you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law for all rational

* GHS 5000.00 is about 1035 US dollars.

1 beings” (Sanders,2003, p.31). In this case, the decision by the research participant
 2 to take the money for the emergency surgery was not based on his own will to act
 3 good irrespective of the consequences of his decision on the survival of his
 4 daughter. In connection with the same question, interviewee SU narrated:

5

6 Normally, as a journalist you are supposed to provide voice for the voiceless and
 7 protect the interest of the society. So why should I allow myself an individual person
 8 to influence my passion with gift. So, the issue of dropping the story and going back
 9 for the GHS50,000.00 to save my ward from death is something I will not consider.

10

11 It can be inferred from the views expressed by the respondent that journalists
 12 are supposed to give voice for the voiceless, and their reportage should be linked
 13 to commitment to truth, fairness, objectivity and protect the interests of the
 14 society. This understanding is congruent with the Golden Rule principle which
 15 stipulates that you should do to others as you will have them do to you (Sanders,
 16 2003). In this regard, the decision of the study subject to reject the monetary offer
 17 and report the true story reflects the logical preposition that human beings are
 18 more likely to enjoy life if they contribute good deeds to protect the general
 19 interest of society rather than contributing negatively to society. In addition, by
 20 giving voice to the voiceless and protecting the general interests of the society,
 21 implies that the study subject might get the social and psychological comfort of
 22 having done something good for the society.

23 Furthermore, the study participants were asked to share their experiences
 24 about some of the bad ethical decisions they had made in the course of their
 25 journalistic practices. In relation to this, interviewee IK revealed:

26 eehh... as a journalist, in the course of exercising your duty, there will be a
 27 point you will go off line... eeh... I hope you understand? Ehh... in most
 28 cases, when you are invited for a programme... eeh... at the end of the day
 29 you are offered a gift. But as a journalist you are not supposed to take
 30 bribe, you are not supposed to take gifts from even organizers. But... you

1 see.... very often we take gifts from event organisers. That is what we call
 2 solli or solidarity. I hope you understand. Just to show appreciation maybe
 3 for your T&T. Ethically, we are not supposed to take solli.

4

5 It is noted from the above that some of the research subjects take gifts or
 6 bribes from event organizers which conflicts with their professional journalistic
 7 principles to always respect and follow the code of ethics of the profession. In
 8 addition, it has also illuminated the culture of gift-taking which is built and
 9 institutionalized into the economy of media coverage in Ghana. This practice is
 10 not in keeping with article 10 of the Ghana Journalist Association code of ethics
 11 (GJA) which stipulates that: “no journalist shall solicit or accept bribes or any
 12 form of inducement to influence his/her professional duties” (GJA Code, 1994,
 13 p.3). In light of this, the GJA code of ethics does not only prohibits the solicitation
 14 and acceptance of gifts from event organizers, but prohibits any conduct of
 15 journalists which are against the set of agreed principles that guide the conduct of
 16 journalism in Ghana.

17 In another development, a question was asked to ascertain how self-interest
 18 could influence rational ethical decision making under stressful economic
 19 circumstances and interviewee GD explained:

20

21 Well... eeh... Self-interest is excessive greed. Do you get it? Everyone has interest,
 22 there is no human being in this world without an interest, but you see your interest
 23 should not eat into your duties. In as much as you have interest, your interests should
 24 not override the interests of the general public. Eeh... Self-interest can influence
 25 ethical decision because we belong to associations, ethnicity, we have friends’,
 26 families, and religion. Sometimes you are tempted to play down these things to be as
 27 fair as possible, but in most cases, you are consumed by these things.

28

29 The above narration does not only cast light on the selfish nature of human
 30 beings, but it has also clarified how our membership to professional bodies, ethical

1 ideals and values, families, friends, ethnicity and religion could influence our
 2 ethical judgements under problematic situations. In light of this, the inability of the
 3 research participant to act professionally in some cases could mean that the
 4 research participant does not recognize that balanced and truth reportage are
 5 preeminent values in journalistic practices. In addition, by acting unprofessionally
 6 in some cases due to the personal biases of the research participant (ethnic,
 7 religion, nationality and race) are not in tandem with the assumption of the
 8 deontological ethical principle of Kant which posits that...“*a person must always*
 9 *be treated as an end and not merely as a means*”(Sanders,2003, p.31). This
 10 implies that no matter the circumstances all humanity is to be treated with due
 11 respect and dignity because human beings are rational beings and are their own
 12 ends.

13

14 **Situating Objectivity and Truthful Reportage in Stressful Social and** 15 **Economic Circumstances**

16

17 This part of the analysis is concerned with how the respondents position their
 18 decisions pertaining to upholding objectivity and truthfulness when confronted
 19 with ethical decision making under stressful economic circumstances. A dominant
 20 perspective from the empirical data is the fact that some of the journalists consider
 21 society as their initial reference point in taking such decisions under such trying
 22 situations. The justification of this assertion is grounded in the expressed statement
 23 of interviewee JU:

24

25 Basically, journalism is about the interest of society and so whatever decision you
 26 want to take in the performance of your duty you must consider the society first, is it
 27 in the interest of the society (public interest) that is what often informs my decisions
 28 as to what to do, and so basically; is informed by simply asking myself whether what
 29 am going to do will benefit the society, and so if yes, then I go ahead and do the
 30 same.

1

2 Extracts from the interview data above seeks to drive home the fact that when
 3 confronted with difficult ethical judgements, some journalists take into
 4 consideration the implication of their decisions on the society defined as public
 5 interest. This is to be anticipated because it smacks of a dimension of collectivism
 6 to which Africans are mostly classified into. In the northern part of Ghana, the
 7 views of the general society weigh so much on the conduct of an individual on the
 8 grounds that individuals feel themselves part and parcel of the larger society. They
 9 reside and work in societies and the cultural world view of their societies are what
 10 they reflect (Wyatt, 2014). Under the circumstances, an individual journalist will
 11 forgo his or her selfish interest to serve the interest of the public. After all, the
 12 number one obligation of a journalist is to report the truth with an overriding
 13 loyalty to professional values, the public, and virtue which prefers social
 14 improvement to personal interest (Nasdi, 2016). It can also be seen in the light of
 15 Fletchers's (1966) assertion that decisions and actions are good so long as their
 16 outcome engenders love and happiness to the actors. As such, the decisions of
 17 journalists that bring them happiness are those that represent the interest of the
 18 public.

19 In addition, our interview data has also highlighted elements of friends,
 20 relations and other actors within the society who try to exert some amount of
 21 influence under difficult ethical decision making to influence objective, accurate
 22 and truthful reportage. In connection with this, interviewee SP narrated:

23

24 My experience about ethical dilemmas ...eeeh... eeh... You see this is a very
 25 difficult question. In most cases, you try to be objective and sincere to your work, but
 26 you are confronted with the powers within the society. People try to influence or stop
 27 you from reporting the true story. Friends, political figures and even family members
 28 may try to influence you not to report the true story.

29

1 The above statement further demonstrated the fact that ethical practice is a
2 complex process that is concerned with moral uprightness/fitness in a defined
3 context. This assertion implies that the exercise of ethics borders on moral
4 philosophies which are contexts specific because morality is many times
5 subjective, and depends on the situation and contexts. Ideally, practitioners must
6 be independent in the exercise of their personal conscience and ethical
7 inclinations, but here we are with influential elements within the social context
8 trying to sway journalists off their ethical obligations.

9 Moreover, when the study participants were asked to share their views about
10 situations where ethical values were violated, in response, interviewee SK stated:

11
12 Even though they are ethics, in practice we sometimes abuse these ethics, we go
13 against these ethics to solve problems, you can't just say that because ethically you
14 are supposed to do this and there is something spoiling somewhere ...eeh... and you
15 will say no I won't do this because of ethics. Eeh ... ethically, when you don't do it
16 you are not praised for that, ethics are not bidden by law, they are just supposed to
17 guide you, but at any given time in practice, one will stray into some controversies
18 because if you don't break those ethics, you will not be able to get a good job done in
19 your opinion.

20
21 The submission of the interview participant revealed that ethics are not
22 guaranteed unbreakable, though there may be cut and dried stipulations to guide
23 the conduct of journalist. In this regard, at any point in time, ethics can be set aside
24 in the interest of the public. This understanding is in keeping with the pragmatic
25 ethical principle which is concerned with the ultimate success, and with little
26 concerned on the means to the success because the end justifies the means
27 (Sanders, 2003). Even though, researchers such as Merrill (2004) regarded this
28 approach as Machiavellian, the fundamental responsibility is to provide truthful
29 reportage as far as possible and how to achieve that is less important. The research
30 participant demonstrated that you have to trespass upon the ethics sometimes in
31 order to get a good job done. Here, the act of trespassing on the ethical guidelines

1 becomes less important and achieving the ultimate goal (success) is of paramount
2 importance to the journalist.

3 Similarly, in responding to the question on factors that can influence a
4 journalist to take bad ethical decision an interviewee SL had this to say:

5

6 One of it is ehhh, one of the key factors will be economical, yes when your economic
7 situation is so bad, it is very easy to take unethical decision that is one; and then two,
8 if your professional knowledge is not that deep, you may be doing unethical things,
9 but you wouldn't even know. So ignorance is one, economic condition is two.

10

11 The statement above cast light on the economic factors and poor professional
12 knowledge that could influence journalists to take bad ethical decisions. These
13 economic factors and poor professional knowledge are to be expected because it is
14 argued that the growing economic pressures of today is generating precarious
15 situations where only few journalists are up to the task of what is perceived to be
16 their responsibilities (Merrill, 2004). In light of this, overriding profit motives are
17 seen to be driving the course of editorial decisions and impeding the processes of
18 quality, truthful and rightful ethical decisions. Also, poor technical knowledge will
19 certainly be a recipe for unethical conduct in that there will be lack of appreciation
20 for the values and principles of the profession leading to poor application of
21 professional expertise, morals and values.

22 Intrinsic to taking ethical decisions under exacting circumstances are the
23 integrity and personality journalists work to protect. This is where working
24 journalists try to be honest and upright by holding on to what is right and truthful
25 in the face of challenging situations. The foregoing has been expressed in the
26 statement of interviewee AB:

27

28 What matters most in every job is integrity. In a case like this, I will consider it as a
29 fraud. In journalism, you need to look at the number of people who will be affected
30 by the activities of this particular bank, do you get it? So the picture has to go beyond
31 you and don't forget that as a journalist, the principle for your job is public interest.

We are working in the interest of the general public not in your interest. So if you decide to take the 50,000.00 cedis and then let the story go, you are putting the lives and investment of over 100,000 people in danger, your story will stop a lot of harm or damage than is going to cause people investment.

Here, the study participant has considered his/her integrity and as well as the expectations of a practicing journalist by the public, and regarded the financial inducement as a fraud. The evaluation led him to arrive at the conclusion that taking the 50,000 cedis and killing the story will be detrimental with far-reaching consequences to the public interests than an individual becoming complicit to the offer of inducement. This understanding resonates with the consequential ethical philosophy which holds that the “consequences of an action are the key to assessing whether the action is ethical or unethical” (Sanders, 2003, p.32). In light of this, upholding to the professional principle of objectivity, truthfulness, and balance reportage and rejecting the financial inducement because it is considered as a fraud and might have a negative consequences on the society sought to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people in the society.

Conclusion

The paper explores ethical dilemmas and management in stressful economic circumstances among journalists in the three administrative regions of northern Ghana. Our analysis of the perspectives and opinions of 30 journalists across the three regions on ethical dilemmas and how ethical decisions are taken under stressful economic circumstances evidences the need to move beyond holistic application of the western normative ethical principles in different circumstances and contexts. In light of this, we call for the application of contextual-based ethical principles by journalists in dealing with ethical dilemmas under stressful economic circumstances in Ghana.

Again, while journalists highlight their watchdog role over society and provide voice for the voiceless, the study revealed situations where journalists' personal interests and biases (ethnicity, religion, nationality, and professional associations) override the public interests in making ethical decisions under stressful economic circumstances. In view of this, the study concludes that there should be clear demarcations between personal interests and public interests, and comprehensive rules should be put in place to ensure that the public interests are always promoted by the journalists.

Finally, while the GJA code of ethics prohibits the solicitation and acceptance of inducements and bribes, the study revealed that a good number of Ghanaian journalists are not able to adhere to the GJA code of ethics. Therefore, the paper recommends that the GJA should organize regular training on media ethics and short professional courses for its members to improve upon their professional knowledge and skills on how to manage ethical dilemmas in stressful economic and social circumstances.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

The study has one major limitation. It did not cover the entire regions in Ghana and that forms a major limitation of the study. Journalists, specifically, media practitioners and all those who work in the media industry in one way or the other can be confronted with ethical paradoxes, for which making choices will be very eminent. We encourage researchers in the field of media and journalism to consider exploring the ethical dilemmas within the political systems and decisions concerning public welfare and parties' interests.

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