

Review

Perspective on Media Sensationalism and Ethical Dilemmas in Ransom Kidnapping Cases in Nigeria

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Kidnapping-for-ransom remains one of Nigeria's most disturbing security challenges, and the media's role in framing such incidents in headlines cannot be overlooked. This opinion paper explores how sensationalist reporting practices such as dramatic headlines, focus on ransom amounts, has created ethical dilemmas for journalism in Nigeria. It argues that while the media must inform the public, excessive sensationalism risks heightening public fear, undermining trust, and inadvertently legitimising criminal enterprises. The paper contends that Nigerian journalism must balance public interest with ethical responsibility, particularly in safeguarding victims and upholding national security. In light of the foregoing, this paper contextualises this discourse within the Framing Theory and Priming Theory. Scholars acknowledge, that sensationalism is an age-long phenomenon that has become a norm and may not end anytime soon. The paper in support of the scholars, advocate for the Nigerian public to be cautious of media sources it chooses to engage and for journalists to avoid sensationalising kidnapping ransom details as such could influence susceptible Nigerians to engage in the crime.

Keywords: Media Sensationalism, Ethical Dilemmas, Kidnapping-for-Ransom, Responsible Journalism, Nigeria

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Introduction

In Nigeria, kidnapping-for-ransom has emerged as a prominent sociological phenomenon, profoundly affecting the daily lives of its citizens. It has become one of the most frequently reported issues in Nigerian mass media, with news channels covering and sensationalising kidnapping-for-ransom headlines and stories almost on daily basis. This incessant reportage of the incidents of kidnapping and divulging of the huge ransoms demanded or collected by the criminal elements is capable of swaying susceptible Nigerians to engage in the reprehensible crime. Supporting the aforesaid, Adisa and Abduhareem (2012) argues that traditional crime reporting in Nigeria has consistently been filled with sensationalised accounts that exacerbate conflicts and fuel hostilities over time. This relentless coverage highlights not only the frequency of such incidents but also their significant impact on both individual lives and the broader social fabric. The constant stream of stories about kidnappings and the substantial ransoms paid by victims' families underscores a

growing crisis that reflects deeper issues within Nigerian society, including security challenges and the economic pressures that fuel these crimes. Echoing this sentiment, Ikemesit Efiang, Head of Research at S.B. Morgen Intelligence, suggests that kidnapping is becoming increasingly widespread, with a surge in both the frequency of incidents and the ransom amount paid (Morgen, 2020). Corroborating the above, Ibekwe & Alabi (2021) stress that kidnapping has evolved into a huge lucrative industry, fostering a thriving criminal economy that attracts more perpetrators.

The central focus of this paper is to examine how the media in Nigeria sensationalise or exaggerate the ransoms demanded or collected by kidnappers and the consequences. This sensationalism makes these stories more compelling and attention-grabbing to the public. The way the media amplify the details of ransom amounts and the hyping aspects of this crime not only captures the interest of the public but also contributes to a heightened sense of fear and urgency among Nigerians. By portraying these ransom demands in an exaggerated manner, the media influence public perception and potentially exacerbate the societal impact of kidnapping-for-ransom in Nigeria, making the phenomenon appear more prevalent and severe than it might be. This phenomenon affects how Nigerians, particularly those with regular access to the media, perceive the threat of kidnapping and the associated risks.

Security serves as a crucial determinant influencing investment destination for both investors and businesses, as thriving in a hostile environment proves to be challenging (Verwimp, Justino, & Bruck, 2019; Imhonopi, & Urim, 2016). Concurrently, the mass media channels have been extensively reporting this incident, including the disclosure of ransom negotiations and payments. The perturbing trend of mass media disclosure of ransom in kidnapping headlines and stories in Nigeria, has attracted some research attention, in a society trudging in a rough socio-economic terrain, entangled in unemployment crisis and intense poverty.

No doubt, the mass media cover crime news within their social milieu because they are considered as newsworthy. However, it is important to question the practice of emphasising ransom payment made by kidnapping victims to secure their freedom, as the story or headline could still hold meaning without explicitly mentioning the ransom. Ekweme and Obayi (2012) suggest that the choice of words, pictures and language of the reports becomes pivotal and significant. In other words, the selection of appropriate words, pictures or language in the media content that will not negatively influence the audience is significant and panacea to averting the imprint of negative messages on the minds of people who have access to the mass media tempting ransoms mentioned in the news. The Nigerian media are often indicted in the allegation of inflaming crime wave through glamourising and failing to step beyond objective /neutral narrative of the notional 5Ws and H of crime reporting (Odunlami & Busayo, 2013). In line with the aforesaid, Adisa and Abdulhareem, (2012) aver that over the years, conventional coverage of crimes in Nigeria and across the world is constantly and consistently stained with sensational stories that escalate the crimes and promote conflicts. The media mostly follow events, they do not explain what led to those events and concentrates on reprehensible news of conflicts and are quiet on peace process. Besides, they often indulge in doing reports that are sensational and emotional in tone. The mass media tend to be more focused on influential people, political opinion leaders, the affluent and the famous that live in towns and cities. Odunlami and Busayo (2013) add that the media when telling every story often do not only choose who and what to include in the headlines and story bodies, but who and what to leave out.

An Overview of Sensationalism

Sensationalism implies the ways the media channels exaggerate or hype news stories to attract attention, engage audiences, or provoke strong emotional responses. This overview covers the techniques used in sensationalism, its impact on public perception and behaviour, and the ethical implications of such practices. The mass media frequently report kidnapping-for-ransom cases due to their sensational nature and the public's heightened interest in such incidents. However, the quality and tone of the reportage vary widely within the media circle. While some media channels strive for factual and responsible reporting, others sensationalise the incidents using graphic imagery and sensational headlines to capture attention. The concept of sensationalism has been a common global practice for ages. According to scholars, it has a long history. Udeze & Uzuegbunam, (2013), have traced sensationalism back to the late 1500s. In 1833, according to the scholars, the *New York Sun*, the first successful 'penny paper' in the United States, exemplified sensationalism. This newspaper, designed to be affordable for the general public, often featured sensationalised content. Historically, sensational and trivial stories drew significant public interest due to its affordability and dramatic reporting style (Emery, 1962).

Sensationalised coverage fosters fear and anxiety among the populace, leading individuals to perceive the threat of kidnapping-for-ransom as more pervasive than it may actually be. Public exposure to media disclosure of ransom can make the people fearful and anxious, it can also make them numbed by the frequency and repetition of the news and content can influence the people negatively (Mental Health UK, 2023; Ingram & Estate, 2019). More so, the manner in which the ransom payments are portrayed in media can influence public perceptions and responses. Sensationalised

reporting may inadvertently glamourise or normalise the practice of paying ransoms, potentially fueling copycat behaviour or encouraging perpetrators to target individuals or communities perceived as lucrative (Akhavue, 2020). Media narrative may also contribute to shaping societal attitudes towards ransom payment, with some segments of the population expressing demands, while others may condemn such actions as capitulation to criminal elements.

The mass media capture public's attention to evoke feelings and sentiments. Vanacore (2021) describes sensationalism as a tactic used in an attempt to gain an audience's attention. Shedding light on the aforesaid, Alison Dagnes, a professor of political science at the Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania, describes some of the ways sensationalism is used which include amplifying language, and trying to use very big words that exacerbate something that can invoke a whole lot of emotions (Rochester Institute of Technology, 2021). In some cases, media channels may sensationalise ransom disclosure by focusing excessively on frantic aspects without providing necessary context or balanced reporting. This according to Alenkhe (2015), can potentially exploit the suffering of the kidnapping victims and their families for media attention seeking. One of the common ways of using sensationalism is through media headlines. Newspapers and magazines mostly exploit big, emboldened words to lure reader's attention. Acknowledging the efficacy of headlines, the traditional media use them to their advantage in summarising news stories as well as draw audience attention and patronage. David Berube – a communication professor on science and technology in North Carolina University agrees that sensationalism goes everywhere from teaser which is an old trick all the way to outright lies, adding, that it is done in print and broadcast media (ResearchGate, 2015). Huge ransoms collected by kidnappers always make headlines in Nigerian media. At times, the amount is exaggerated to sell the media rather than tell the story as observed by Alenkhe (2015).

Supporting this view, Boston (2022) stresses that sensationalism has been engraved in society and may not disappear, because media channels are not slowing down on the exploitation of sensational reports in the media to catch attention and improve sales. Yellowbrick (2023), also believes that the commercialisation of news, drive media organisations particularly those who rely so much on commercials (advertising) revenue to generate income, and further energise the sensationalism tendency. News stories are packaged to sell rather than tell the news, hence, stories like kidnapping-for-ransom that are shocking, controversial or scandalous are given prominence, while important but less sensational are often relegated. This is evident in the views of various scholars that journalism has become the biggest perpetrator of sensationalism all in the name of increasing ratings and spinning money from sponsors. Journalists and media organisations frequently turn to sensationalising news to boost viewership and enhance profits. In fact, the concept of sensationalism is almost inevitable in news packaging.

Sensationalism of Ransom Headlines / Reports: A theoretical link

The issue of sensationalism in the media can be considered both a theoretical and ethical concerns. Theoretical discussions about sensationalism involve understanding what it is and how it functions within media practices. This includes exploring how sensationalism affects news content, public perception, and the overall media environment. Theoretical frameworks examine how sensationalism aligns with or challenges various media theories. In this circumstance, the practice where the media give less attention to certain reports, focusing more on high-profile kidnapping-for-ransom cases involving celebrities and disclosing details like ransoms paid, can be explained through the media framing and priming theories of communication. The media frames of these high-profile kidnapping stories to emphasise dramatic and attention-grabbing elements, influence how the public perceives their importance compared to less sensational cases.

Framing theory is the study of how rhetorical devices can be used to convince the public of the value of any given position (University of Edinburgh Business School, 2022). The above viewpoint, explains the current trend in Nigeria, where media reports exaggerate ransom amounts paid, potentially inflating the perceived scale of ransom payments. Besides, there is irony in how the media disclosures of ransom payments, intended to inform the public, can inadvertently provide insights and incentives for further kidnapping. In some cases, media reports understate the complexities and moral dilemmas associated with ransom disclosures, potentially oversimplifying the issue for public consumption. By extensively covering high-profile kidnappings, the media primes the public to focus on this type of stories, shaping perceptions and discussions about crime and newsworthiness.

Priming theory explains the phenomenon of how prior exposure to stimuli can subtly but significantly affect subsequent perceptions, behaviours, and decisions making (mediatheory.net, September 23, 2023). When media channels repeatedly disclose ransom amounts paid in kidnapping cases, they prime public perception. For instance, frequent reporting on high ransom amounts may lead the public to perceive kidnapping as a lucrative crime, possibly influencing attitudes towards security measures or response to such incidents. More so, the repeated exposure to ransom disclosures in Nigerian media can have psychological effects on victims and their families. It may influence their decisions during negotiations or their

willingness to cooperate with authorities, based on perceptions shaped by media portrayals of similar cases.

Ransom Disclosure in the Nigerian media

The practice of ransom disclosure in journalism practice can be considered as sensationalism. It is not only meant to inform, but to also evoke emotions, amplify fear or outrage, and can contribute to polarised views. Balancing the need for engaging content with the responsibility of accurate reporting is a key challenge in maintaining ethical standards in the media. Undoubtedly, sensationalism is used as a bait. The media channels use exaggerated, shocking, or dramatic elements in their stories to attract attention and engage viewers or readers. Instances of Nigerian media divulging huge ransoms kidnappers demand from victims to regain freedom is alarming and the tactic aims to generate a strong emotional response, such as surprise, fear, or outrage, encouraging people to watch, read or listen to the content. The headlines below, are evidence of Nigerian media disclosure of ransom for twelve years (each headline per year) from 2013 to 2024:

Daily Post (April 17, 2013) "Bamigbetan's abductors demands \$1m"

Punch (June 10, 2014) "Robbers kidnap two sisters, demand N150m ransom"

The Conclave (May 23, 2015) "Abducted Ondo travellers regain freedom after payment of N12m ransom"

Daily Post (January 25, 2016) "Abductors of traditional ruler in Delta abandon N100m ransom"

Punch (September 20, 2017) "Kidnappers collect N10m ransom, kill victims in Port Harcourt"

Daily Post (April 15, 2018) "Gunmen kidnap NURTW chief, demand N5m"

BBC News Africa (May 27, 2019) reported how Nigeria and its President were held to ransom: "In March, 2019, according BBC, a well-known Muslim cleric in Jano who campaigned for Mr. Muhammadu Buhari ahead of his re-election was held for two days by kidnappers demanding for \$833,000 ransom for his release."

Premium Times (May 28, 2020) "Insecurity: Nigerians pay over N7b ransom to kidnappers in nine months"

Vanguard (November 26, 2021) "Pay N200m in six hours, bandits tell family of abducted orderly police officer"

The Nation (April 25, 2022) "Abductors demand N100m ransom from popular Akwa Ibom cleric"

Punch (October. 7, 2023) "Kidnappers collect N50m ransom, free Ondo choristers"

Punch (February 5, 2024) "Kidnapping epidemic: Fundraising for ransom persists, Ekiti pupils' families pay N15m"

Each of the headlines as presented by the media above, is alluring considering the humongous ransoms disclosed. The Nigerian media divulging such huge ransoms demanded by kidnappers in a depressed economy where unemployment rate in 2023 was 3.07% with more than half of the population living on less than \$1.90 a day is glamourising and capable of attracting susceptible Nigerians to embrace kidnapping-for-ransom (O'Neill, 2024; Adesina, 2022; Akhabue, 2020).

The goal of sensationalism is often to increase audience engagement and boost ratings, even if it means sacrificing accuracy or depth in the reporting. Udeze and Uzuegbunam (2013) citing Emery (1962) stress that sensationalism has been an issue of concern in the media industry since the 20th century, a period that the call for a more socially responsible media became profound as the media were seen as displaying a culture of irresponsibility in the face of the freedom they enjoyed when the free-market ideology (libertarian philosophy) prevailed. Surprisingly, the same media that clamoured for a free-market ideology have relapsed and indulged in unethical practices, prompting scholars to admonish journalists to adhere strictly to ethical tenets of the journalism profession else, their goal becomes contradictory. Supporting the aforesaid, a professor of journalism at the University of Lagos, Ralph Akinfeleye warns that the press as "Fourth Estate of the Realm" can transform to be "Fourth Estate of the Wreck", doing irreparable damage or wrecking the society it serves, when it does not refrain from unprofessional or unethical practices. Corroborating this, Akhabue (2020) also warns that the current style of the media reporting millions of naira collected as ransom by kidnappers is glamourising and it may do more harm than good. The incessant hyping of humongous ransoms comes amidst the current economic crisis occasioned by joblessness and pervasive hunger in Nigeria. The media are therefore, advised to refrain from the unethical practices to effectively address the insecurity in Nigeria. Otherwise, they will continue to be perceived as worsening the problem of insecurity (Nwabueze & Ebeze, 2013). Media representations of ransom situations are deeply troubling, with the potential to exacerbate the severity of kidnapping-for-ransom (Akhabue, 2020). Consistent with the above, Adisa and Abduhareem (2012) argue that traditional crime reporting in Nigeria has consistently been filled with sensationalised accounts that escalate conflicts and fuel hostilities over time.

Kidnapping-for-ransom has evolved into a huge lucrative industry, fostering a thriving criminal economy that attracts more perpetrators (Ibekwe & Alabi, 2021). Echoing this sentiment, Ikemisi Effiong, Head of Research at S.B. Morgen Intelligence, suggests that kidnapping-for-ransom is becoming increasingly widespread, with a surge in both frequency of incidents and the ransom paid. There is an indication that the media are complicit in the illicit business of kidnapping-for-

ransom as a kidnapper confessed that he learnt the art of kidnapping by watching Zubby Michael's movies (Punch 1st January, 2022). Zubby Micheal is a Nollywood actor who plays criminal roles in movies. Supporting the negative impact of the media (particularly television), and disturbed by the upsurge in crime and criminality particularly kidnapping-for-ransom cases in Kano State, the Executive Director of the State's Censorship Board, Ismail Afakalla announced the decision to ban and prosecute filmmakers and television stations who show movies with kidnapping and related crimes (Vanguard *Arewa Voice* 24th September, 2021).

The Consequences of Sensationalising Kidnapping Ransom headlines / Reports

The Nigerian mass media often exaggerate details or focus on the most sensational aspects of the ransom situation, rather than providing a balanced and accurate account. Here are some of the impacts of news sensationalism of ransom in Nigeria:

1. **Skewed Perception:** Sensationalised stories can distort public understanding by emphasising dramatic elements or exaggerating details, leading to a skewed perception of events. The Nigerian mass media through the framing and hyping of ransoms in kidnap reports create the impression that the illicit business is beneficial. They glamourise kidnapping-for-ransom and makes it look so lucrative, thus, may attract susceptible Nigerians (Akhavue, 2020). Put succinctly, the media coverage of kidnapping-for-ransom portrays it in a way that makes it seem appealing or profitable. By giving excessive attention to such crimes, the media could unintentionally glamourise or sensationalise the act, highlighting the financial rewards that kidnappers receive. This portrayal can potentially attract individuals who are struggling economically and might see kidnapping as a viable option to alleviate their financial difficulties. In essence, the media's focus on the sensational aspects of these crimes could contribute to an increase in such activities, exacerbating the problem.

2. **Heightened Fear and Anxiety:** Sensationalism often highlights the alarming aspects of news, which can increase public fear and anxiety among Nigerians about issues that might not be as widespread or severe as portrayed in the media. This is corroborated by Mental Health, UK (2023), which stresses that sensationalist reporting of kidnapping-for-ransom can cause apprehension and panic among citizenry. It further adds, that negative news generates increase levels of cortisol in bodies (the body's stress hormone) leading to heightened levels of anxiety which are not designed to sustain. This leads to mental and physical health problems.

Sensationalist reporters blow issues out of proportion as they make mountain out of a mole hill. For instance, official Crime Statistics of Australia show that the majority of crimes are non-violent but media reports often convey a different impression (Hollis, Downy, Del Carmen, & Dobbs, 2017). According to the data, homicide rates have decreased in Australia, despite public perceptions suggesting an increase. These perceptions are created by the mass media through sensationalism thus, leading to heightened fear and anxiety.

3. **Distrust:** When the Nigerian media sensationalise news for attention and financial gain, it can undermine trust in the media sources. The public may become sceptical of news accuracy and reliability if they feel they are been manipulated for profit or attention. Audience research conducted by Oloyede, Opaleke, Uche and Opaleke (2024) shows that many Nigerians doubt media objectivity on kidnapping stories. Students reported that reporting often sensationalises incidents and under-reports root causes. The study further states that this distrust encourages people to turn to social media / word-of mouth for information, which could further spread rumours and falsehood. This approach report involves prioritising sensationalism over accuracy and ethical standards. These newspapers aim to increase their readership or sales, even if it means compromising journalistic integrity and ethical consideration.

4. **Superficial Reporting:** Sensationalism often leads to oversimplified and superficial reporting on complex issues. Some Nigerian media do not cover social issues like kidnapping with depth and nuance they require, leading to uninformed public. Some kidnapping-for-ransom incidents are so shallow and are vaguely reported. The coverage of these incidents is imprecise, lacking in detail, or insufficiently informative. This vague reporting may omit crucial details such as the efforts being made by security agencies in apprehending the kidnappers; provide incomplete information, or fail to clarify important aspects of situation. As a result, the public may not receive clear or accurate understanding of the events, which can lead to confusion, misunderstanding, or a lack of awareness about the severity and specifics of kidnapping cases. Sometimes, kidnapping incidents are reported without doing a follow-up except on issues involving prominent individuals in society. Supporting this view, Odunlami & Busayo (2013) aver that the media tend to focus on influential people, political leaders, the affluent and the famous that live in towns and cities and when telling every story often do not only choose

who and what to include in the stories, but who and what to leave out.

5. Polarisation of the Polity: Sensationalist reporting may exaggerate the frequency or severity of kidnapping-for-ransom cases, leading to heightened fear and anxiety among the public. This exaggeration can deepen existing social and political divides, as different groups may interpret the situation differently based on the sensationalised information. The media's focus on dramatic aspects of kidnapping cases can create conflicting narratives about the causes and solutions to the problem. Corroborating this, Okoli (2024) links kidnapping and banditry to governance in Northern Nigeria. It stresses that competing narratives whether insecurity is due to federal neglect, ethnic bias or local elite complicity have polarised political discourse between Northern leaders and the central government. With different groups holding divergent views on the effectiveness of government responses or the role of security agencies. Nigerian media's sensationalist reporting on kidnapping-for-ransom contributes to increased political polarisation. By amplifying the severity and frequency of these incidents, the media exacerbates tensions between political parties. Opposition parties may use the media's coverage to criticise the ruling party, accusing it of failing to effectively address the issue. The Nigerian press sensationalises the abduction of Chibok girls, focusing more on government failures than on victims' plight. Such coverage, though raising awareness, contributes to polarisation by aligning with partisan narratives - government vs. Opposition vs. civil society (Ajakaiye, Nworzor, Ojeka, *et al* 2021). This creates a rift between parties, deepening political divisions and making it more difficult to find common ground or develop unified strategies to tackle the problem.

6. Dissemination of False Information: Sensationalised stories are more likely to be shared widely, which can contribute to the spread of misinformation. This is capable of escalating conflicts or misunderstanding and can affect public behaviour of people engaging in crimes like kidnapping-for-ransom. In 2020, the Nigerian media reported that a Chinese citizen kidnapped in Ekiti State paid a N100m as ransom to regain freedom but in a swift response, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Nigeria debunked the report, describing it as spurious and unfounded (Maho, 2020).

Sensationalism and the Ethical Dilemma

This paper, highlights the ethical concerns associated with the journalism profession. Journalists, have a profound influence, capable of both elevating and damaging individuals' lives, as well as causing irreparable damage in society. Consequently, journalism is highly scrutinised for ethical standards. Supporting this fact about the media in the United States, Woo (Okunna, 2003) presents research evidence which reveals that a substantial portion of the American public (88%) believes reporters frequently employ unethical methods in their work. This suggests a growing mistrust in journalistic ethics and concerns about the profession's integrity and irresponsibility. In Nigeria, the media have faced criticism for unethical practices. Ray Ekpu, the Chief Executive Officer of *NewsWatch*, in 2002, notes that what the media deliver to the public is akin to what Dr. Adidi Uyo from the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Lagos refers to as "headlies" (Okunna, 2003). This implies that there is a significant concern about the quality and integrity of media content in Nigeria. The term "Headlies," as used by Dr. Adidi Uyo, suggests that the media may be focusing more on sensational or misleading headlines rather than providing accurate and substantive reporting. Ray Ekpu's comment highlights a broader criticism that media practices may not always align with ethical standards, potentially compromising the reliability and value of the news or information being presented to the public (Okunna, 2003).

Sensationalism and ethics are important concepts in media and communication, and they often come into conflict because the media indulge in the former, while flouting the latter to evoke emotions and improve patronage. Sensationalism often clashes with ethical journalism practice as the pursuit of sensational stories could result in compromised accuracy of news, unfair representation leading to biased reporting and exploitation where the privacy and dignity of individuals can be violated. Sensationalism, is one of the ethical issues in the media practice as journalists and the media they represent, overtly defy the ethics or code of conduct of the profession. Vanacore (2021) reinforces the aforesaid by admonishing journalists to deliver facts to the public and not to be deceptive with their stories, noting that sensationalism violates ethical guidelines in support of these practices. Ethics refers to the principles and standards that guide behaviour and decision-making, determining what is considered right or wrong. Journalistic ethics are the principles and standards that guide journalists in their work to ensure strict adherence to accuracy, fairness, and integrity. According to United States' former Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart, ethics means knowing the difference between what you have the right to do and what is right to do (Coffey, 2013).

Ethics can be universal (ethical universalism) or relativity (ethical relativism). The former implies that there are objective moral principles that apply to all people regardless of their cultural or individual differences. These principles are considered universally valid and should guide ethical journalistic behaviour. The issue of objectivity, accuracy, fairness, balance and truthfulness in news reportage, are essentially embedded in the ethical universals in journalism profession. While ethical relativism refers to the moral principles that are not absolute but vary depending on the culture, social, or

personal contexts. According to this approach, what is deemed ethical or unethical can differ from one cultural background or individual to another, and there is no single, universal standard for morality (Okunna, 2003). While ethical relativism might focus on understanding and addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to kidnapping-for-ransom in Nigeria like poverty, media disclosure of ransom amounts, value system, ethical universalism prioritises a consistent, human rights-based approach to combat the crime of kidnapping-for-ransom and protect victims.

Ethics entails a high degree of public trust and to earn and maintain the trust, it is morally imperative for journalists and the media organisations to observe the highest professional and ethical standards. Okunna (2003), reminds the journalists to refrain from reporting acts of violence, armed robbery, terrorist activities or vulgar display of wealth in manner that glorifies such acts in the eye of the public, noting that reporting the aforesaid, amounts to a disregard for the ethics of journalism. According to the former Supreme Court Justice of the United States of America, Potter Stewart, ethics is knowing the difference between what you have the right to do and what is right to do (Coffey, 2013). In clear terms, and with reference to the ethics, media reportage of kidnapping-for-ransom as well as the mention of ransoms paid by the relatives of kidnap victims are synonymous with the acts of reporting armed robbery just like the disclosure of ransoms is tantamount to vulgar display of wealth embedded in the provisions of the code of conduct as enunciated by Okunna (2003), and are blatantly unethical practices. Reporting humongous ransoms paid by kidnap victims or persons who have kidnapping ransom value (KRV) undoubtedly exposes the victims to more danger as they may fall victims again. Now, the questions arise: can the mass media report events devoid of exaggeration or dramatisation? Can journalists really report incidents without an element of sensationalism? Can they cast headlines without the mention of ransom? Here, are the perspectives of some scholars on the issue. A United States' professor of journalism, Mitchell Stephens says that he has never found a time when there was no form of news exchange that included sensationalism. He adds, that this trend dates back to anthropological accounts of preliterate societies, where news spread rapidly, such as the story of the man who fell into a rain barrel while trying to visit his lover. The professor concludes that sensationalism is inevitable in news because people are more naturally attracted to sensations particularly those involving sex and violence (Udeze & Uzuegbunam, 2013)).

News, being the commodity manufactured for consumption must be enticing to the public. They have to go through a process that involves selecting stories, framing them, and often tailoring the content to the preferences or interests of their target audience. In doing this, the gatekeepers (reporters and editors) ensure that stories that arouse interest or evoke emotions (an element of news selection) are reported and such stories involve kidnapping-for-ransom, a contemporary phenomenon in Nigeria. In fact, the socio-cultural milieu where news or information is relayed influences the choice of words used by the media practitioners in order for communication to be effective. Supporting this view, Udeze and Uzuegbunam (2013), emphasise that the message being communicated must conform to the cultural context so as to be meaningful to the audience. They add, that the current media practice in Nigeria is such that certain sensational words and the ways of communication have become the norm that when such words are not used in some situations, the real message may seem not have been relayed.

Lending credence to the above, Emelobe (2016) stresses that the process of assigning or selecting news stories can sometimes result in sensationalism. This happens when the criteria or decisions behind choosing which stories to cover prioritise dramatic, attention-grabbing, or controversial elements rather than focusing on factual, balanced, and important reporting. For example, if a news editor assigns a story because it features scandalous or shocking details that are likely to attract more readers or viewers, rather than its overall newsworthiness or relevance, this can lead to sensationalism. The focus becomes more about drawing attention rather than delivering accurate and responsible journalism. In a nutshell, it is the news story assignment that leads to charges of sensationalism. Drawing inferences from the foregoing, it is a common place in the Nigerian media landscape that the practice of using certain words like the stupendous ransom kidnappers collect from their victims in news headlines and story bodies make the public more attracted to the content and the media.

So, it may be very challenging to completely separate sensationalism from journalism because it is deeply embedded in the field or has become a traditional aspect of how journalism operates. In other words, sensationalism is so integrated into journalistic practices that eliminating it entirely is difficult. Shedding light on the issue, Halbrooks (2019), considers a scenario, where a reporter covers violence in a jail facility and some inmates wounded. The sheriff organises a press briefing, saying they are investigating an "incident" to probably downplay the violence. In that scenario, the reporter is at liberty to his choice of words to replace the word "incident" as used by the sheriff when reporting the briefing. The reporter may decide to synonymise "incident" with other words like scuffle, uprising, or riot. The goal of the reporter is to describe the violence objectively and accurately as possible but the sheriff may accuse the reporter of sensationalising the story because of the choice of words while relaying the news to the public. It is obvious that the hyping or framing of ransom in headlines is a common practice generally, in media environment but it can however, be de-emphasised without hampering the grammatical flow or clarity of the headline or story. This is essentially to mitigate the influence of the ransom mentioned in the headlines or stories on vulnerable Nigerians. Akhabue (2020), argues that the current style of media reporting

millions of naira collected as ransom is capable of luring susceptible Nigerians to take to the crime of kidnapping-for-ransom. In averting this phenomenon, Ekweme and Obaji (2012), opine that the choices of words, pictures and language of the reports are essential in preventing or mitigating negative media contents that can sway the audience negatively.

Conclusion

Even though sensationalism constitutes an ethical issue, divulging ransoms kidnappers demand or collect from kidnap victims, has become a norm and may never be separated from journalism practice. This is because sensational reports are deliberately or consciously crafted to attract public patronage and increase profits. Media reportage of humongous sums collected as ransom by kidnappers is glamourising and may do more harm than good. It may be antithetical to the actual goal of the report. Supporting this perspective, Boston (2022) stresses that journalism has become the worst perpetrator of sensationalism all in a bid to attract patronage and shore up revenue. Corroborating the aforesaid, Yellowbrick (2023) emphasises that the regular demand for attention-grabbing headlines, reporters and the media organisations they represent, always indulge in sensationalising news to boost readership, listenership, or viewership and to enhance profit. The sensational and repetitive reporting of the ransom may sway susceptible Nigerians negatively and may be capable of influencing people to perpetrate and perpetuate the crime of kidnapping-for-ransom. In a nutshell, reporting kidnapping ransom makes it sound lucrative and financially rewarding.

Put succinctly, journalists and the mass media organisations in Nigeria will persist in violating ethical standards specifically regarding how they report or reveal information about ransom cases, potentially undermining ethical principles such as discretion, accuracy and responsibility. This is in a bid to attract attention and maximise profits but this practice may encourage the vulnerable to indulge in the crime of kidnapping-for-ransom in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Although, sensationalising kidnap ransom headlines or reports in the media may linger, this study suggests that the best approach to mitigate the phenomenon is for the public to be wary of media sources that it chooses to engage. Besides, news consumers should proactively seek out reliable sources and support high-quality journalism. Above all, the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) should consider sanctioning journalists and media organisations for any ethical infractions to serve as a deterrent to others who sensationalise news.

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