

The Ghana Journalists' Association Code of Ethics as a Guide for Journalistic Practice in Ghana: Views of Selected Media Practitioners in Ghana

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Abstract

This study explores the awareness, adherence, perceptions, and attitudes of media practitioners in Ghana towards the Ghana Journalists' Association (GJA) Code of Ethics. Against the backdrop of the growing importance of journalism in Ghana's development, the study investigates the role of the GJA Code of Ethics as a guide for journalistic practice. The research, conducted through qualitative methods, examines journalists' familiarity with the code, the extent to which they adhere to it, and their perceptions and attitudes towards its efficacy. In all, thirteen experienced journalists from the Central and Western Regions were interviewed to receive the needed information but only seven accepted to participate in this study. Those who accepted the invitation to participate in the study did so by filling out an electronic disclosure and consent form. The study, grounded in the Social Responsibility Theory, emphasizes media organizations' responsibility to uphold ethical standards. The GJA, established in 1949, plays a crucial role in advancing media professionalism and ethics in Ghana. The GJA Code of Ethics, initially adopted in 1994 and revised in 2016, serves as a guiding framework for journalists to promote professionalism and ethical conduct. The research reveals that while journalists exhibit a high level of awareness of the GJA Code of Ethics, adherence to the code is voluntary, and membership in the GJA is not widespread among practitioners. Despite positive perceptions and attitudes towards the code, there is evidence of ethical violations in journalistic practice in Ghana.

Keywords

Awareness, Ethics, Media, Practitioners, Professionalism

1. Introduction

With the democratisation of the Ghana's political system in 1992 and the concomitant development of a free press, the importance of journalism in Ghana has grown considerably over the last three decades. This boon is easily illustrated by the fast growth in the numbers and variety of journalistic outlets in Ghana's media landscape. However, the practice of journalism is not a new phenomenon in the country. Since Ghana's independence in 1957, journalism has been instrumental in inciting and advancing socio-political discourse and change, in shaping public opinion, in advancing democratic principles, and in holding duty bearers accountable. Today, regardless of the health of journalistic practice in Ghana, there continues to be discourse around journalistic freedom and the need to protect such freedom.

Associated with the need to protect journalistic freedom has been the tacit consensus that such freedom should be balanced with responsibility. It is as Sharma (2021: p. 150) avers, that "any freedom comes with... responsibilities" and particularly more so with journalism as it has the power to shape public thought. Sharma (2021) continues to argue that journalistic freedom is not absolute, but subject to public censure, and hence, the development of an ethics code is an elementary requirement of a profession that seeks freedom of practice. In fact, the development of a regulatory code of behaviour has long been recognised as a signal of professionalization of any vocation (for example, see Wilensky, 1964). In that vein, in the study of journalism, codes of ethics are generally considered indicative of the professionalisation of journalistic practice (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Splichal & Sparks, 1994). Particularly since the adoption of the *Declaration on the Principles of the Conduct of Journalists (Code of Bordeaux)* by the International Federation of Journalists in 1954 (amended in 1986), the history of the development of professionalism in journalism has shared a trajectory with the history of ethics codes (Deuze, 2005; Kovačič & Van Putten, 2011). One way to approach ethics has been to lay them down as formal codes, after having distilled those codes from prevailing informal conversations about journalism ethics (Hafez, 2002).

Professional or formal ethics codes—usually self-imposed—comprise principles that regulate the behaviours of persons or groups who practice a specified occupation (Charles & Sikiru, 2022). In journalism, ethics comprise standards of "good practice [as they are] applicable to journalists." (Sharma, 2021: p. 150) as defined by Ward (2020: p. 307).

Journalism ethics is the study and application of ethical norms that guide the social practice of journalism, in its many technological and organizational forms. The motivation is to use the freedom to publish responsibly, according to the aims of public journalism.

Journalists are subject to universal ethical principles like telling the truth and minimising harm, hence, journalists have obligations and standards to uphold. In addition, they possess the power to set political agenda and significantly impact public opinion (Babcock, 2012; Elliott, 1986). Journalists are expected by their

publics to be responsible in their use of the power they wield—to be truthful, to champion democracy, to verify information, to be independent, and to be unbiased. Journalism is an essential component of any functional democracy, and ethical journalism ensures that practitioners uphold the public trust.

It is against this backdrop that the National Council of the Ghana Journalists Association, under the auspices of the Friederich Ebert Foundation, first developed and adopted a formal code of ethics on July 27, 1994. This code governed journalistic practice until 2016 when in response to “the proliferation of media types,” “the emergence of new media forms” (such as social media), “the impact of media pluralism and diversity,” and the sharp increase in the numbers of television and radio outlets across Ghana, the GJA revised the Code and published an updated edition (Ghana Journalists Association, 2023; Tarlue, 2016). The GJA Code of Ethics is supposed to function as a guide for journalistic practice in Ghana, with the goal of promoting professionalism and ethical conduct among journalists.

However, over the three decades that the GJA Code of Ethics have existed, there has been little research into journalists’ awareness of, adherence to, and perceptions and attitudes toward the Code. Moreover, stakeholders are concerned that adherence to ethical norms in journalism in Ghana is deteriorating; there remain questions regarding media practitioners in Ghana adhering to and implementing the GJA ethics code. The present study was, therefore, an attempt to fill the research gap by exploring journalists’ familiarity and interaction with the GJA Code of Ethics. The novelty of the present study is in its keen focus on the GJA Code. The researchers hope that the findings reported in this paper may spark increased academic interest in journalists’ adherence to formal ethic codes, and in the meantime, provide some elementary insight into why journalism ethics may be deteriorating in Ghana.

Research Goal and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the opinions of selected media practitioners regarding GJA Code of Ethics, which serves as a standard for journalistic conduct. In pursuit of this goal, the study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) How aware are journalists of the GJA Code of Ethics as a guide for practice?
- 2) To what extent do journalists work with the GJA Code of Ethics?
- 3) How do journalists perceive the GJA Code of Ethics, and what is their attitude toward the Code?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), a well-established and widely recognized framework that evolved as the world shifted away from the Libertarian theory of the press, particularly in the aftermath of World War 2. The Social Responsibility Theory posits that media organizations have an inherent re-

sponsibility to serve the public interest and uphold ethical standards. It emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of earlier models, such as the Libertarian and Soviet Theories, which emphasized individual freedoms and the state's control over media respectively. This theory was formally propounded in the book, *Four Theories of the Media: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet Communist concepts of what the press should be and do* (Siebert et al., 1956). Baran (2004) posits that SRT emphasizes that the media must remain free of government control, but, in exchange, the media must serve the public. According to Christians et al. (2009), the theory emerged during the Cold War when the world was divided into three parts: the capitalist West, the Socialist East, and the Underdeveloped South. However, the origin of the term social responsibility, and its associated meaning and theorizing, is attributed to the earlier landmark *A Free and Responsible Press* (1947) of the Hutchins Commission (Christians et al., 2009).

The primary thesis of the theory is that freedom is inextricable from obligation or responsibility; as such, the press with its privileged and protected position under civil authority is responsible to the public for the execution of certain important functions of mass communication in modern society (Petersen, 1956). It follows that the degree to which any systems of liberties meet society's requirements is a direct function of the degree to which the press recognises its obligations and founds its operations in them (Petersen, 1956).

In essence, the social responsibility theory agreed with the six tenets of the libertarian theory that preceded it. These six functions of the press, that have come to be generally accepted as the traditional roles of journalism, are:

1) servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs; 2) enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government; 3) safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government; 4) servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising; 5) providing entertainment; 6) maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests (Petersen, 1956: p. 74).

However, SRT critiqued the prevailing interpretations and praxis that had come to be associated with those functions (Petersen, 1956). For example, while the social responsibility theory accepted that the press should service the political system and safeguard personal freedoms, practitioners had failed in this regard. Furthermore, it rejected the libertarian notion that a free market would self-regulate and therefore supply some sort of regulatory ethos regarding how journalism was done (Petersen, 1956). Instead, the social responsibility theory argued for a more proactive and agentic approach to making the press serve the interests of society by means of formal codes of conduct.

SRT focuses on the role of media in promoting social good and accountability, aligning with the principles of ethical journalism. Journalists possess significant social power to set political agenda and significantly impact public opinion, and

they are expected by society to use this power in responsible ways (Babcock, 2012; Lynch & Rice, 2023; Sharma, 2021). The Social Responsibility Theory emphasizes that media organizations should not only report the news but also be accountable for their actions. Bittner (1989) has it that the theory held that “a press has the right to criticize government and institutions but also has certain basic responsibilities to maintain the stability of society.”

The social responsibility theory of the press is closely related to journalistic ethics. Its implementation led to the formation of professional journalistic associations that have developed codes of ethics and official journalistic standards aimed at promoting responsible behavior among their members (Uzuegbunam, 2013). Ethical codes in journalism play a crucial role in defining the values, professional norms, and social responsibilities of media organizations. These codes are closely linked to the political and cultural systems and the media environment in which they are created (Himmelboim & Limor, 2008, 2010; Limor & Himmelboim, 2006). Social Responsibility Theory highlights the concept that journalists have an inherent duty to provide information that is in the public interest (McQuail, 1992). This implies that journalists should adhere to ethical standards in their reporting to ensure that the information they provide benefits society and the public at large. The theory underscores the accountability of media practitioners to the public, which is a fundamental aspect of journalism ethics (Ward, 2010).

According to the Social Responsibility Theory, the media is expected to practice objectivity (Siebert et al., 1956). This theory demands that journalists report news in a fair, balanced, and unbiased manner. Adhering to this principle aligns directly with journalism ethics, which emphasizes the importance of impartiality, avoiding bias, and presenting facts accurately (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). The theory promotes the independence of media organizations and journalists from external influences that could compromise their editorial integrity (Herman & Chomsky, 1984). This principle is in line with journalism ethics, which requires journalists to avoid conflicts of interest, such as accepting gifts, favors, or financial incentives that could compromise their reporting (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The theory emphasizes that ethical considerations should guide the decision-making processes of journalists (Ward, 2010, 2020), especially when they face moral dilemmas. This aspect is closely related to journalism ethics, as ethical codes and guidelines provide a framework for making responsible and ethically sound decisions in the practice of journalism (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2021). Media practitioners are accountable to society as per the Social Responsibility Theory (McQuail, 1992). This implies that if journalists violate ethical standards, they are accountable not only to their employers but also to the broader public. This accountability to society is a strong motivator for media practitioners to adhere to journalism ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The GJA Code of Ethics is a crucial aspect of media studies in Ghana. It provides a tangible ethical framework for media practitioners, emphasizing key principles such as fairness, accuracy, and accountability. The code aligns directly with the Social Responsibility Theory, and

it serves as a guide for responsible and ethical journalism in Ghana. The GJA Code of Ethics was established to ensure that media professionals uphold high standards of ethics and professionalism, and it reflects many of the principles and values advocated by the Social Responsibility Theory.

The few extant studies on journalistic ethics in Ghana provide valuable insights into journalists' interaction with the GJA Code of Ethics. These studies often examine how Ghanaian journalists navigate ethical dilemmas and whether they adhere to the principles outlined in the code. [Adu-Gyamfi \(2016\)](#) investigated the ethical challenges faced by Ghanaian journalists in their day-to-day practice. The study found that while journalists are aware of the GJA code of ethics, practical challenges often hinder their ability to strictly adhere to it. [Adjei \(2017\)](#) examined the extent to which Ghanaian journalists comply with the GJA code of ethics in their reportage, particularly in the coverage of sensitive political issues. The study found that political pressures and the competitive nature of the media industry sometimes led journalists to compromise ethical standards. [Darko \(2020\)](#) conducted a study into investigative journalism in Ghana and his findings reveal that some acclaimed journalists in Ghana did not follow ethical codes in their investigations. It appears that the ethical challenges identified in the extant studies are linked to the complex task of balancing societal needs, ethical considerations, and professional responsibilities—precisely the issues addressed by the Social Responsibility Theory and the GJA Code of Ethics. The GJA Code of Ethics acts as a tool to help media practitioners navigate these challenges, offering guidance on how to uphold the core principles of ethical journalism, including objectivity, accountability, and serving the public interest.

2.2. The Ghana Journalists Association

The Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) is a professional organisation that supports the interests of Ghanaian journalists and media practitioners. It was founded in 1949 and has since grown to become the country's most renowned media organisation. The GJA is responsible for advancing media professionalism, ethics, and quality through training, advocacy, and stakeholder engagement. The GJA organises training programmes, workshops, and conferences for journalists to improve their skills and understanding of journalism practices. The organisation also offers legal and ethical assistance to media professionals who experience challenges in their job, such as harassment, intimidation, and censorship. Furthermore, the GJA advocates on issues pertaining to media freedom, regulation, and development with other media organisations, international organisations, and government agencies. The association collaborates closely with the National Media Commission (NMC) to guarantee that the media industry is adequately regulated and that journalists have the freedom to report on matters of public importance.

Journalists must carry out these responsibilities by respecting ethical standards of their job. The GJA Code of Ethics is a guide for Ghanaian media practitioners to encourage professionalism, accuracy, impartiality, and responsibility in their

work. The code outlines the ethical principles and values that journalists need to adhere to in their practice. It also highlights the standards of behaviour and conduct that journalists need to uphold, including respect for human dignity, the right to privacy, and the right to a fair trial.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Methodological Approach and Study Design

The study design was exploratory, cross-sectional, non-experimental and set in the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivist research is metaphysically idealist in the sense that it posits that reality is in the mind, and that the mind's interpretation of phenomena is as valid as the phenomena themselves (Walliman, 2018). The present study was wholly qualitative. Qualitative research is "a method for examining phenomena, predominantly using 'words' for data" (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017: p. 142). Qualitative research often is conducted in the natural setting of the phenomenon being studied, and attempts to gain meaning through the voices of study participants (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). In this work, the researcher endeavoured to solicit and analyse the subjective perspectives and experiences of selected journalists.

An exploratory qualitative approach was preferred by the researcher because he deemed that the subject of the present study was under-researched in Ghana. Additionally, the researcher aimed for a deeper discussion of research participants' views and experiences, rather than a broader snapshot of journalists' interaction with the GJA Code of Ethics. Qualitative is typically in-depth (more so than quantitative research), and used to develop theories and hypothesis on questions that have not received much study (Edlund & Nichols, 2019; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015).

3.2. Population of Interest

The population of interest were those employed in the media field who identified as and were acknowledged as journalists. For the purpose of this study, the researcher adopted this simple definition of a journalist by Splendore (2022). He defined a journalist as someone who provides information about current events that are considered to be important by a large audience usually through mass media networks such as radio, television and newspapers.

3.3. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A multi-stage non-probability sampling technique was applied in the selection of participants for this study. In the first stage, a small convenient sample was selected from the researcher's own personal and professional networks. Then, a snowball approach was used wherein the originally sampled journalists directed the researcher to other journalists in their own networks.

Non-probability sampling approaches are most often associated with qualitative studies. In fact, non-probability sampling methods are one of the key features

that distinguish qualitative research from quantitative studies (Patton, 2015b). Non-probability sampling techniques are known for the biases that they introduce into studies; however, these biases are acknowledged as strengths—and therefore welcome—in qualitative studies, which focus on depth rather on generalizability of findings (Etikan, 2016; Patton, 2015a).

Thirteen journalists from a number of media houses in the Central and Western Regions of Ghana were initially invited to participate in the study. These journalists were from two main media formats: radio and television. The narrow range of formats was not a deliberate choice on the part of the researchers; it was happenstance. All 13 journalists were sent a Google Forms URL.

Seven journalists accepted the invitation to participate in the study by filling out an electronic disclosure and consent form (Google Forms, <https://shorturl.at/ezHT8>). This sample size was considered adequate because the study was about qualitative content analysis and, in such studies, sample size is not much of a concern unlike quantitative data. It is the data power that is much of a priority (Wutich et al., 2024). Therefore, a skip logic built into the form was designed such that respondents who consented to participate were sent to a section wherein they selected their preferred mode of response. If they elected to respond via Google Forms, a second skip logic enabled them to access the interview items. If a respondent elected to participate via a phone interview, then a follow-up call was made by a member of the research team to schedule the date and time for the interview. Three journalists responded on Google Forms, and phone interviews were conducted with four other journalists.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Qualitative data was generated using a combination of interviews (using a semi-structured interview guide) and a qualitative survey on Google Forms. The questions in the interview guide were generated based on insights from reviewed literature. Interactions with interviewees were recorded using an audio recording application on a smartphone.

In order to accommodate the scheduling conflicts with some respondents, and in order to make better use of limited research time, a qualitative survey was deployed on Google Forms. This avenue of data collection allowed some respondent to be able to participate in the study who otherwise could not make time for phone interviews. The limitation of qualitative data collection via Google Forms was that it did not allow for immediate follow-up probing of responses.

3.5. Data Handling and Analysis

The audio files were manually transcribed. The transcripts as well as the typed in responses from Google Forms were coded with the help of Taguette, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Basically, codes in Taguette analysis are generated by highlighting portions of an imported text or document. Immediately the highlighting is completed, a pop up of “new high-

light” is created allowing the researcher to either create a new tag or assign the highlighted portion to an existing tag. This was done to generate tags from the document after which the coded document was reviewed for interpretive consistency. Each tag in the sidebar was clicked to see all text segments highlighted with that code across all documents. An etic thematic analysis was done to generate insights from the responses. This was done by creating themes and their subs in a hierarchical manner in the right-hand side of the document that was being analysed. The information generated was discussed along with excerpts from the transcripts.

3.6. Findings and Discussion

The journalists interviewed had a broad range of journalistic interests. Their interests were found to cut across current affairs, entertainment, sports, and politics. Other interests were social, particularly human-centered issues including child labour and gender justice. Typical responses from those with a focused interest on political and social issues are illustrated by the following excerpts:

I take an interest in issues relating to political stories... I also take interest in child labour and gender inequality. I believe all these issues are connected because if you want to fight gender inequality and child labour issues, it depends heavily on the policies that are passed by the political leaders. Politics is everything, so if you want something to change, you need to involve yourself in politics to enact that change.

It's mostly political and social issues. This is because I think that whatever is around us has to do with social issues, this could be health, economy and so on. Politics, because it is the political actors and space that determine what happens around us.

The study participants' typical daily routines involved nosing out issues, “producing stories” by writing news reports, and in some cases presenting such news. For example, some of the journalists described their typical daily routines thus:

I start my day by monitoring local and international news. I then look at international days, for instance, in this month of October, the trending issue [is] breast cancer awareness. After I do all these, I narrow... down to Cape Coast metropolis and I write on stories that the people find relevant. I look for stories of those whose voices have not been heard and I report on them.

When there aren't invitations to programs... I source for stories from authorities, follow news from around the globe...

I happen to be the regional correspondent for [a large media corporation]. I try to search for news. I monitor local stations because that's where [I] get to know what the local issues are. [I] can get story ideas from listening to these reports, then [I] now dig deeper. At times, too, [I] walk around or even [drive around] in a car and look for stories and reports that are worthy of attention.

These routines fit the typical description of a journalist's primary job description. The Wikipedia entry for *reporter* as a type of journalist defines it as “... re-

search[ing], writ[ing] and report[ing] on information in order to present using sources. This may entail conducting interviews, information-gathering and/or writing articles.” (Wikipedia, 2023). Zayed (2022) described the role broadly as involving collecting, analysing, and writing news stories.

3.7. Journalists’ Awareness of the GJA Code of Ethics as a Guide for Practice

A prerequisite to conduct in line with professional ethics is awareness of the ethics code (Sharma, 2021). Studies have shown a positive relationship between awareness of journalism codes of ethics and compliance with those codes (Charles & Sikiru, 2022).

Professional codes and ethics are taught as part of journalism or media studies curricula (Sharma, 2021). And there has existed for a long time the idea that formal journalism education may positively influence ethical practice (see, for example, Rest (1979), and the work of the famed Joseph Pulitzer (1904)). However, not all journalists become aware of ethics codes by means of formal training; practitioners may come to know about a professional code of conduct by means of their participation in a particular vocation. At any rate, it appears that more recent scholarship on the relationship between formal journalistic education or training and ethical sensitivities has mixed results (Zayed, 2022; Motlagh et al., 2013), that is to say that formal journalistic training may not be as necessary to ethical awareness, and especially adherence, among journalists as might be supposed.

In the present study, it was found that not all journalists had a background in media studies. For instance, one journalist responded that they had formal training in “development economics” and had gravitated toward journalism. Most of the journalists in the present study, though, had some university-level education in media studies. Regardless of academic training, nevertheless, all journalists interviewed affirmed their awareness¹ of the GJA Code of Ethics. In fact, the least amount of time within which a respondent had possessed a copy of the GJA codes was 2 years. One journalist had owned a copy of the Code for 8 years, another for 10 years, and yet another for 17 years. With the exception of one case, all other respondents indicated that they had downloaded the code from the website of the GJA.

Awareness of code of ethics, whether through professional training or as a consequence of practice, does not necessarily predict a sense of being bound by said code. When respondents were asked in this study whether or not they felt bound by the GJA code, there was unanimous affirmative response. Reasons presented for such obligation are illustrated by these excerpts:

It is guide for the journalistic profession.—DO

I feel bound because they are the ethical ways to practice proper journalism.—

AO

¹Journalists were asked directly. “Verbal report is the most direct method we can use to find out if a person is aware of some knowledge.” (Timmermans & Cleeremans, 2015: p. 21).

Because that defines and guides me in line of job [sic].—OO

It provides guidance for me to exhibit professionalism in my journalistic practice.—S

You should feel bound by the code of ethics if you are a member of an association so I believe as an aspiring member, I should be bound by the code of ethics.[sic]—EA

...in school, we were taught that you can't consider yourself a trained media person without following the codes. Even if you don't know everything, you should have an above average knowledge about it.—TC

[The GJA Code] tells us the do and don'ts of a journalist. When you are in the field and you apply some of the things stipulated there, they prove very beneficial. ... these codes have been written by highly professional and experienced practitioners who took inspiration from international codes, so I think as a journalist, you should be bound by the code of ethics. Even though they are not mandatory, they are practical.—ES

The last sentence in the last quote above is interesting. It indicates that following the GJA codes is not “mandatory”, suggesting that journalists do not necessarily have to feel bound by it. This observation comes into focus when it is considered that none of the journalists interviewed was a registered member of the Ghana Journalists Association. In many well-established professions, people can only legally practice or use professional designations (such as Doctor, Engineer, Lawyer, Quantity Surveyor, etc.) if they are registered with a professional and regulatory organisation (examples, see [Nelson & Nelson \(1997\)](#) and [Phelan \(2010\)](#)). Such arrangements are supported by the idea that professional associations, while preserving the interests of the profession, may also take the lead in regulating the behaviour of their members with a view to maintaining the integrity of the profession ([Sharma, 2021](#)). The professional designations are therefore signifiers of quality, and the associations or organisations may revoke permissions to use their respective designations ([Finch et al., 1999](#); [Lester, 2009](#); [Nummelin, 2008](#)). In the present study, none of the journalists was a member of the GJA. Some reasons offered include:

They aren't visible enough to attract my attention to get registered as a member.

I waited this long before applying because I didn't consider it be a relevant association. ...I say this because they used to be very dormant. ...but that story is changing. I see them to be proactive now in the welfare of journalists. They organise seminars to train journalists. They've also come out with courses and awards to raise the professionalism in journalism.

I applied to be a member some years back but there were issues with the registration and I kind of[sic] relaxed after that. The executives are on me [sic] always to come and register but I keep procrastinating.

It appears from the foregoing responses that the GJA as a supposed regulatory organisation may have had—and probably still have challenges—with being properly organised and administered. This speculation could be a subject of care-

ful academic study and illumination.

Gleaning from the comments and perceptions of respondents concerning the authority of the GJA as an enforcer of its codes, the GJA appears to have limited or no real powers over journalistic practice in Ghana. In fact, the voluntariness of adhering to the GJA Code of Ethics raises questions about the extent to which the GJA can actually regulate journalistic practice in Ghana.

3.8. Extent of Journalists Work with or Adherence to the GJA Code of Ethics

As discussed earlier in this paper, awareness of ethics codes may not necessarily predict that journalists will work with or adhere to the code. One of the interests of the study being reported on in this paper was to find out how much journalists worked with or adhered to the Code. It was presumed that answering this question would be a tricky proposition for reasons of reactivity effects (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Tavakoli, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Zedeck, 2014), that is, journalists' potential desire to be seen to conform to social norms (Social Desirability Bias) and their desire to appear favourably to an interviewer while being observed (Hawthorne Effect). One way to deal with these response biases is to make third parties (real, abstract or hypothetical persons) the objects of an enquiry, so that the focus is shifted from those being actually observed (Tavakoli, 2012). For this reason, journalists participating in this study were asked about ethical violations (not theirs) that they had observed in practice. Respondents were asked to give anonymous accounts of real-life violations they had observed. Only three of the seven respondents felt comfortable sufficiently to respond to that line of enquiry. Excerpts from their responses are presented below:

Recently there was a media house that [published] a news story which proved to be false later on. A particular journalist actually did that.

Some journalists write stories and publish them but when you pick these stories and you put them online, you find out that they picked the stories from a place without sourcing it. They just recopy the stories without sourcing it. At times you write your story and someone just picks it and publishes it as their own without acknowledging you the writer.

There are instances where people have published things without verification. Some radio presenters go on air and say a lot of things that are false especially on [political party-affiliated] stations. So, if it's an NPP station, the presenters go on air to [malign] the NDC, and vice versa.

The first response is about false reporting, which is a fundamental and universally acknowledged breach of ethics; just about all formally published journalism ethics codes stipulate truth and accuracy as the first hallmarks of reporting (Christians et al., 2009; Ghana Journalists Association, 2023; Hafez, 2002; Hutchins Commission, 1947; McBride & Rosenstiel, 2014; McQuail, 1992; Petersen, 1956; Society of Professional Journalists, 2014; Ward, 2010, 2020). The second excerpt above is about plagiarism. The GJA Code of Ethics specifically stipulates that “a

journalist does not plagiarise because it is unethical and illegal.” (Ghana Journalists Association, 2023). The third excerpt above illustrates a direct violation of the GJA’s ethical stipulation that a journalist “recognizes the public’s right to fair, unbiased, accurate, balanced and comprehensive information.” (Ghana Journalists Association, 2023).

The researcher of this study sensed, during interviews, that ethical violations were quite widespread, even though respondents were reluctant to discuss these matters at length. It is unclear why there is such apprehension about discussing infractions, especially when in this study the respondents were specifically asked not to mention names in recounting events of ethical violations. It is likely that such reticence, in this study, about the ethical infractions of others are indicative of reluctance to report journalistic ethics code violations to proper authorities. The author of the present paper hesitate to speculate about the specific reasons for this reticence. However, literature shows that there are a multitude of often contextual factors that discourage professionals from reporting the ethical infractions of their peers (King & Hermodson, 2000; Mayer et al., 2013; Mojapelo & Faku, 2019; Nair & Kamalanabhan, 2011; Porter & Prenzler, 2016). Perhaps future studies could pursue such reluctance of Ghanaian journalists to discuss ethical violations of the peers.

What was clear, though, was that ethical violations were not censured in any meaningful ways that could be described as sufficiently deterrent. Concerning the journalist who is alleged involved in untruthful reporting above, the study respondent indicated that “*nothing was actually done to the journalist.*” Concerning the case of plagiarism, the respondent offered that, “*nothing [is] done to any of these journalists. They are mostly forgiven and life goes on.*” The strongest criticism of the GJA’s inability to enforce the codes is illustrated by the response below:

The GJA is a toothless bulldog because the codes are there and people flout but they don’t do anything. However, what happens is that, for instance, [aggrieved parties] could sue the [offending journalist] or call for a retraction.

Such sentiments about the GJA, coupled with the fact that registering with that organisation is voluntary, might be responsible for the possible breadth of ethical violations in journalism in Ghana.

3.9. Journalists’ Perceptions of and Attitudes towards the GJA Code of Ethics

For the most part, it was found that the journalists interviewed had a positive attitude toward the GJA Codes. The perceptions of the Code are illustrated by these responses:

It helps you to be professional in your work
 ...one cannot work without the code of ethics in journalism. They are the standards.

They serve as a guide to the journalist on how to be professional.

It provides a journalist with a high sense of responsibility.

They are the guideline and you should know them...

It also seems that the journalists who participated in the study had positive attitudes toward the Code. This was illustrated in their responses concerning their consultation of the Code. It is instructive to place these responses in the context that there are hardly any punitive consequences, from the GJA at least, for not working up to Code. Note these sample responses:

I consulted the code because of the influx of social media and it's publications.

I needed to reference something for a story I was writing, which would demand I make a direct quote from it.

[When] I hear something about a journalist doing something unethical, I try to find out what the codes say about such a thing.

Regardless of these positive perceptions and attitudes, the researcher also noted tensions between journalists' perceptions of real-life field situations and the provisos in the GJA Code. It was also observed that there was a possible gap between journalists' understanding of the letter of the Code and the spirit of same. To illustrate, there are these sample responses:

Some of the things that happen on the field are not really captured in the codes.

The codes do not really reflect real life situation. That is what happens on the field can be very dicey and complicated and it is not always black and white like the codes suggest.

There is a portion that talks about fairness and balance. Sometimes when you are dealing with issues between two groups where one group is marginalized, the dominant group may not be forthright with the information. So, if you decide to wait for the dominant group until they are ready to release the information, it kills the time factor of the story and the marginalized group may end up being silenced.

I did a story about a village in a particular district where autistic kids are alleged to be buried alive. So, I chanced on someone who told me her child had been buried alive. She revealed to me the identities of the people who had buried her child. Now in all fairness, I should have gone to them to hear from them, but might have given them opportunity to tamper the evidence. Sometimes, fairness allows the guilty party to cover their tracks.

Another one has to do with the "sol". There are some journalists who take as low as 300 cedis at the end of the month. So, imagine such a person is invited to a program in another town, how does the person transport himself to the location on such a meager salary? So, it is not realistic at all in my opinion.

Journalists occupy a space in society in which they must deal with ethical tensions every day. Studies from Asia have shown how journalists are often confronted with the ethical dilemma of weighing truth against other principles, such as those regarding respect for others, privacy, and religious sensitivities and requirements (Rao & Lee, 2005). Musa and Domatob (2007) posit that in such conflicts, it is truth that is often sacrificed. Particularly in Africa, ethnic affiliations, deep reverence for authority and community are significant issues to navigate as part of ethical journalism (Mfumbusa, 2008). It is the position of this study that

where adherence to Codes are voluntary and largely based on some sort of honour system, the social contract between journalists and society become particularly difficult to sustain. Therefore, there is need to strengthen GJA's regulatory powers in Ghana. And the opportunity for such strengthening is presented by journalists' positive perceptions of and attitudes toward the GJA Codes even as they negotiate tensions between the Code and their understandings, their sense of justice, their everyday experiences, and the practical realities within which they operate. After all, as [Friend and Singer \(2015\)](#) argue, what distinguishes journalism from other forms of publication are ethics, because how the journalist operates is what assures their legitimacy, and hence survival, in a world where anybody can publish content but not everybody can be a journalist.

3.10. Limitation of the Study

A major limitation of this study was that, national GJA executives were interviewed for their inputs concerning operationalization or enforcement of the code of ethics in media organizations in the country. There was also no documentary evidence on enforcement of the GJA code of ethics by national officers of the GJA.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The seven selected journalists were found to very much aware of the GJA Code of Ethics, even those who had not formal journalistic training. The Code was easily accessible over the internet and journalists showed initiative in accessing it from that source. Even though there is general recognition of the Code as binding on all operators in the journalism space, none of the journalists interviewed had registered with the GJA. It appears that even though the GJA promotes the Code of Ethics as guidance for journalism practice in Ghana, that organisation is not set up with the proper enforcement authority. Therefore, compliance with the Code of Ethics seems to work on some sort of voluntary honour system. It is the position of this study that the widespread awareness of the Code among journalists is an opportunity for further more promoting compliance with it. However, more journalists could be pushed beyond mere awareness and recognition toward compliance if the GJA had stronger enforcement authority. The researcher encourages the GJA to begin to push toward more regulatory powers in order to much more professionalized journalism practice in Ghana.

It appears that while journalists may hesitate to flout the stipulations of the code under normal circumstances, their resolve in this regard can be easily broken under certain conditions, especially where they are faced with trade-offs between morality (as defined by the code) and personal interests. The journalists in this study, while offering some real-life examples of scenarios in which the ethics codes had been blatantly breached, still appeared apprehensive about disclosing ethical violations. It is therefore unclear from this study the extent to which journalists work with the Code of Ethics and the gravity and spread of ethical breaches in the journalism space. The researcher recommends further, more in-depth exploration

of ethical violations in Ghana, followed by studies that can confirm how commonplace these violations are. Such studies would present formal acknowledgment of the ethical situation, and therefore inform a more serious discussion of the matter.

Journalists appear to have positive perceptions of and attitudes toward the GJA Code of Ethics. This is in spite of the many ethical dilemmas that they grapple with in their wish to be ethical in practice. Some of the tensions have real-life and immediate consequences for individual journalists and even the public. Nevertheless, it seems that some of the perceived tensions arise possibly due to misunderstandings of the moral principles enshrined in the GJA Codes; it seems that some journalists would prefer an exhaustive ethical code that anticipates a wide variety of dilemmas and supplies direct stipulations for these conundrums. A GJA with greater regulatory and credentialing authority—which we advocate for—could use its credentialing system to push for more ethical training for journalists.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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