Reassessing 'Journalistic Objectivity': Towards Resolving Sustainable Development Challenges in Nigeria – The Community Media's Perspective

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Abstract:

This study explores how journalistic objectivity is practised by community broadcasters in Nigeria vis-à-vis sustainable development considerations, as well as the proposals for the reassessment of journalistic objectivity in media laws. Drawing on the strengths of descriptive survey research design, the paper highlights the contextual, conceptual and methodological frameworks proposed for the reformulation and applications of journalistic objectivity. The study also recommends a careful balancing of the need for detached details with the life world contexts of communities in news reports, so as to offer broader opportunities for justice and equity across communities. Again, because of the difficulty in measuring journalistic objectivity with exactitude, other terminologies such as honesty, accuracy and fairness that connect better with local values and norms, should substitute objectivity in national regulatory frameworks as well as development prescriptions. Community media practitioners would also need to urgently address the disagreements within their ranks on basic policy issues, so as to have unified frameworks to handle those issues to impact positively on social development.

Key words: Journalistic objectivity, sustainable development, cultural constructivism, integrative reporting, alternative journalism, community media, positivism, pragmatism, existentialism.

Introduction:

Between 2015 and 2023, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), on behalf of the Nigerian government, granted about twenty-two provisional licenses to development organizations and grassroot communities across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja (FCT), to operate geographic community broadcasting media. This development has brought about a change in the old narrative of marginalisation and deliberate restrictions of access to the national broadcasting airwaves against rural communities and in favour of official and private ownership of the media.

Nigeria now has an emerging culture of geographic community broadcasting, operating alongside over 30 campus radios and 700 active private and government-owned radio stations. Information received from the *Nigeria Community Radio Coalition* (NCRC), the coordinating body for the community media sector in the country, shows that about eighteen of the recently licensed community radios are already on air. How these

stations function to engage, not only in development communication, but also to support ethical practices in journalism, in the form of objective reporting, now remains one of the issues of concern in the country.

Objectivity is a cardinal ethical principle in journalism and has been the subject of media and communication debates as well as intensive historical, anthropological and sociological researches over the years. It refers to an expectation, an ethical requirement, and the exercise of fairness, non-partisanship, neutrality and factuality about an issue in news reports through the media. Journalistic objectivity is, however, a controversial concept. Some view and accept it as a cornerstone and cement of professional journalism. Others see it as a myth and a mere deception meant to cover up cultural, capitalistic and even national biases in storytelling and the need to avoid approaching stories about human events and realities with the kind of an empathic understanding they require (Okon, 2014; Maras, 2013). For the latter, the pursuit of journalistic objectivity is challenging, and its achievement sometimes, difficult. Thus, the concept has both positive and negative dimensions.

While the objectivity principle of journalism tends to deal more with the intellectual or logical dimension in terms of the pursuit of truth and dispassion in news stories, the emotional or value dimension that it lacks, which is very much linked with the subjective question, still constitutes a gap in the attainment of an integral and moral perspectives in sustainable development initiatives, globally.

In view of this, and following on the continuing advocacy by community media organizations and other groups for the inclusion of the empirical, subjective and empathetical perspectives in news for the purpose of a holistic and moral coverage of human needs and social realities (Okon, 2014: 43-46), this study proposes a reassessment of the objectivity requirement in journalism practices, globally. It seeks to understand whether we still need objectivity and impartiality in the newsrooms in Nigeria and how/why.

While this issue of journalistic objectivity is not new to the general debates on the media and journalism practices, it still requires ongoing conversations and the insertion of new perspectives to re-awaken interests and considerations for change both at the cultural and institutional levels.

The study uses the Nigeria experience as a case study to offer inferences that could be applied across board. The study explores the philosophical, anthropological, and the sociological values of journalistic objectivity, the functional link between journalistic objectivity and sustainable development along the lines of positivist, existentialist, and pragmatist researches, as well as ascertains how ethical objectivity in journalism could be better practised to ensure balance in sustainable development programmes. The argument is not on the practical possibility of the imperative, which has been exhaustively delt with across quarters, but on its value for the advancement of sustainable development programmes across societies.

While the general objective of the study is to offer proposals (conceptual and methodological) for the reassessment of the 'objectivity' question in media laws and towards the resolution of some of the sustainable development challenges across Nigeria, the specific objectives are tied around the following:

i. To examine how community media journalists in Nigeria feel about and value journalistic objectivity;

ii. To explore the significance of journalistic objectivity to sustainable development in Nigeria;

iii. To examine the level of achievement in sustainable development made possible by the principle of objectivity in journalism in Nigeria;

iv. To ascertain the constraints to the acceptability and application of the objectivity question vis-à-vis sustainable development in Nigeria; and,

iv. To establish the ways by which the challenges could be mitigated for a better practice of journalistic objectivity vis-à-vis sustainable development in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework:

Providing a conceptual framework for the realization of the above objectives is the *cultural constructivism* theory, which asserts that knowledge and understanding are not passive reflections of an objective reality, but are rather actively constructed through cultural contexts and social interactions. This theory emphasises the decisive role of cultural factors in shaping perspectives, values and interpretations. In the domain of media and communication, it demands a recognition that news reports and media narratives are not neutral, but are heavily influenced by the social constructs of the communities they serve (Berger & Luckman 1966).

While the traditional view of objectivity in media law champions impartiality and fairness, the evolving media landscape in culturally-diverse countries like Nigeria, necessitates a critical examination of the possibility of 'true objectivity' – the type that is both value-oriented, impact- and empirically-based, moral and logical, detached and empathetic. The core question addressed in this context is: Can media outlets shift the narrative to align with local situations without compromising integrity?

This issue is particularly significant in the context of sustainable development debates. Scholars like Schudson (2001) argue that, as diverse cultures conceive sustainability in varying ways, what is regarded as sustainable in one context may not hold the same meaning in another. The same may be said about the principle of objectivity: what looks objective in one context may not necessarily be seen as objective in another.

A robust reassessment of media objectivity is, therefore, imperative - focusing on one that wholeheartedly embraces pluralistic narratives and respects diverse cultural viewpoints, while steadfastly striving for fairness. This means that journalistic objectivity should involve not only factual reporting, but also the ability to represent the interests, values, feelings, experiences and narratives of marginalised individuals and communities, alongside those of the elite and the powerful of our societies in any sustainable development Discourses, Goals And Policymaking.

Conceptualising Sustainable Development:

Sustainable development is a buzz word in contemporary sociological, anthropological and developmental discourses, globally. There is a wide range of literature and policy documents addressing this phenomenon. Its definition with precision and exactitude, with emphasis on the interconnectedness and complementary nature of its diverse conceptual paradigms, principles, approaches, and practice trajectories is, however, still problematic in scholarship (Mensah, 2019). Different scholars, therefore, approach the concept differently, based on their unique prisms of view.

For the purpose of this study, however, the concept of development is taken to connote a process of growth and change at both the personal and social levels. At the personal level, development centres on the physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and creative skills capabilities of individuals (Lumen Learning, 2020). At the social level, it touches on the economic, environmental, social and management capacities of communities, groups, institutions, or organisations (Safdie, 2024). Development analysis, therefore, essentially focuses on people, or organisations and the opportunities available to them, rather than solely on the richness of the economy they live in (IISD, 2023).

Ibrahim (Interview, 2024) highlights the various principles of development to include the pursuit of *equity*, in terms of fair access to resources and opportunities for all, regardless of their background, circumstances, or gender; *environmental stewardship* which involves a responsible use of natural resources, the protection and preservation of the natural environment; and *economic viability*, in terms of support for economic growth, job creation, and standard livelihood. Others are *social inclusion* whereby efforts are made to foster inclusive societies, promote participation in decision-making processes, and empower marginalised groups; *cultural preservation* in which cultural diversity and heritage are valued and maintained; and *inter-generational responsibility* by which the impacts of today's actions on future generations are evaluated and the future generation assured of inheriting a viable and healthy society. The principles and dimensions are broad; but generally, the process of development analysis, regardless of the dimension, does bear implications for human thinking, planning and action (Mensah, 2019).

Development, however, becomes 'sustainable' when the process and its outcomes are of a long-term basis "within the confines of a finite ecosystem" (Mensah, 2019: 5). Balbinot and Borim-De-Souza's (2012) clarification of the term 'sustainability' and its historical link to 'sustainable development', however, shows that 'sustainability' could be read in a number of ways, including "an uninterrupted process of transformations" (2012: 162) along the different axes of development. Its ultimate goal is to integrate the principles or elements of development and "maintain a dynamic balance within a complex system over a long period of time" (Ibid.).

Beyond these conceptual dimensions, a number of approaches or models to the understanding of sustainable development also exist in scholarship. PSB's (2023) document, for example, highlights four principal approaches – positivist, multi-dimensional, eco-system, and livelihoods approaches (p. 2). Balbinot and Borim-De-Souza (2012), however, identify two models from the perspective of management study, namely, the 'techno-centric' and the 'eco-centric' models. The two models conceive sustainable development and sustainability differently, whether in terms of systemic dissolution of the status quo, or systemic continuity (p. 155).

Kumari's *Introduction to Sustainable Development* (2024) also explores the different paradigms and trajectories of sustainable development, highlighting the various aspects of a multi-dimensional approach. Of great interest to this study is the authors' distinctive views on a 'positivist approach' to sustainable development, which will be examined much later in the paper.

The different categorisations, notwithstanding, the entire process of sustainable development is anchored on strategic planning and actions for the actualisation of human needs, the attainment of justice and equity, as well as responsible human behaviour and actions, at different centres and across diverse, but interrelated parameters of development (Mensah, 2019).

Driven by diverse theoretical frameworks, including empiricism, positivism, modernism, pragmatism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism and globalisation, just to mention a few, sustainable development initiatives strive towards goal-oriented projects meant to advance the well-being of man and human society as a whole.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, unequivocally underscore the imperative for inclusive and equitable quality education, gender equality, and the promotion of economic growth (United Nations, 2015). Dealing with these issues is exceptionally urgent in Africa, where poverty, corruption, and environmental degradation persist (World Bank, 2020).

There is also the need to advance a holistic human development in Africa that takes cognizance of the

commitment to bringing a balance among the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual components of man. It is the argument of this paper that the achievement of these noble objectives would require, not only objective reporting, but also a balanced framing and distribution of information about sustainable development programmes across communities.

Journalistic Objectivity in Media Laws:

Media laws, ethics and regulations seek to balance freedom of expression with ethical standards and public interest, worldwide. While media laws and regulations vary across countries, world regions, media types, and the purpose of the intervention (Media Reform Coordinating Group of Sierra Leone - MRCG-SL, 2024: 3), the core principles of media ethics, in most cases, tend to remain similar across societies. Journalistic objectivity now constitutes part of the ethical frameworks that regulate the media for standards in their oversight and communication functions, globally.

While the various legal codes on the news media as well as the ethical guidelines for institutional communication practices may differ in their details and how they integrate the journalistic objectivity principle based on their different cultural, operational, and political traditions, most share the common priorities regarding the use of this principle, including the elements of responsibility, freedom of the press, independence, truthfulness or accuracy, impartiality, fairness, decency, factuality, neutrality, and accountability in reportage which now constitute the essential features of what is known today as the "canons of journalism" (Saalberg, 1973).

Interestingly, while none of the specific draftings of the code across contexts directly ties journalistic objectivity to sustainable development considerations, it is the clear articulation of this functional connection that make this study distinctive.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE, formerly known as 'Sigma Delta Chi')

was the first to draw up seven articles that constituted the canons of journalism at their convention of 1924 (www.spjnetwork.org). Since then, it has been adopted or adapted and used by a number of other media organizations and professional associations, globally.

The UN Communications Group in Afghanistan's (UNCG) key ethical principles prepared in 2016 to support journalists in ethical reporting, for instance, specifically requires of journalists to seek truth and report it. While the document privileges accuracy, fairness, impartiality, duty to inform, and respect for privacy, it makes it imperative for journalists to distinguish between 'fact-based' and 'story-based' reporting and to verify information before publication, use original sources when possible, and properly contextualise stories. It warns journalists "not to get involved, directly or indirectly, in advocacy activities that harm professional integrity and credibility" (p. 3).

In Africa, the objectivity imperatives are also reflected in a number of national press and broadcasting laws to align with international best ethical practices. Section 7.3 of the 2002 amended South Africa Independent Broadcasting Authority Act 153 of 1993, for example, contains journalistic objectivity requirements to regulate political broadcasting during elections in the country. The term objectivity is, however, used alongside such other terms as 'impartiality' and 'fairness' - two terms that could work to provide complementary measurable regulatory perspectives to the expectation of journalistic objectivity (Maras, 2013).

The revised Ghana Press Code (capped, "The GJA Code of Ethics"), constituted and adopted in 1994 by the Ghana Journalists Association in collaboration with other stakeholders, also takes notice of and expects all journalists in the country to abide by the principles of media freedom and independence. Equally required are truthfulness in reporting, verification of facts and sources of information before publication, as well as recognition of the public's right to fair, unbiased, accurate, balanced and comprehensive

information. They are to "differentiate between fact, opinion, and commentary in such a way that news is presented objectively without embellishments" (www.gjaghana.org). Media organizations in the country are to ensure that news reports adequately reflect an event and do not highlight an incident out of context.

There are a number of other national and regional practice guidelines that capture and reflect similar expectations in relation to objective reporting of stories by the media. The experience of Nigeria, from the point of view of community broadcast media and as reflected in the Nigeria Press Council's Code of Ethics and the National Broadcasting Code of Nigeria (2016) is discussed in the data section of this paper. In the meantime, it is appropriate to trace, in summary, the meaning, history, principles, contested issues, and arguments for and against the objectivity question in journalism.

Journalistic objectivity (impliedly factuality, neutrality, passivity, fairness, nonpartisanship, and/or disinterestedness about an issue), wherever it is used, is closely tied to the concept of news media communication and the ethical standards required for news reportage. The bridge between objectivity and news or public communication has been addressed, in varying ways, by a wide range of authors that either dismiss, affirm, or reinvent the importance of the concept (De Beer, 2009).

Journalistic objectivity has, however, been defined differently by authors, based on their differing practical, theoretical, and contextual positions and needs. Wallace (2019), for instance, sees it as "the modern journalistic ideal as it is performed and enacted in mainstream newsroom" (p. 7). Maras (2013), in turn, defines it as "a general model for conceiving, defining, arranging and evaluating news texts, news practices and news institutions" (p. 11). This paper, however, draws strength from Maras' conception of the term, because of its attempt to tie together the epistemological, ontological, and the procedural aspects of objective journalism.

While the concept is transnational in orientation and incorporates different conceptual and contextual paradigms, scholars (Sonnemaker, 2015; Hackett and Gurleyen, 2015; Maras, 2013), in varying ways, argue that the operationalisation of objectivity in journalism is still nationally or culturally bound and that any standard definition of the term must incorporate its three core aspects - the values, the process, and the language dimensions. They are also in agreement that, though the three aspects are conceptually distinct, they are interrelated and can only provide analytical structures for understanding the complexity and multilayered nature of journalistic objectivity.

As values, journalistic objectivity seeks to separate facts from opinion, present an impersonal view in news reports, and ensure all sides are fairly represented for balance. The process aspect highlights the procedural significance of objectivity, with emphasis on the 'how it is done' (Maras, 2013: 9). This 'how' perspective focuses on the specific representation formats or writing styles of objective reporting, which provides news with 'an invisible discursive frame' that may be considered as fair and balance and with a 'persuasive force' that is based purely on facts and a commitment to represent reality 'as it is' (Ibid.).

Though comprising distinct aspects, different models of what constitute journalistic objectivity and also connect the theoretical with the practical components of the term also exist. Mindich (cited in Wallace, 2019: 7), for example, highlights five basic components of objectivity - detachment, nonpartisanship, use of inverted pyramid for news writing, facticity, and balance. While Henriques' (2021) four-point model provides for objectivity categorised under the elements of realism, intersubjectivity, dialectic, and strategic ritual, Martine and De Maeyer (2018) summarise the existing models into opposing frameworks of "relativist-constructivist" and "rationalist-positivist" perspectives.

Bennett's (2009; cited in Hackett and Gurleyen, 2015) model points to a diversity of practical

strategies for actualising objectivity in newsrooms. These different models are in themselves indicative of why it is important for journalists across different contexts to understand from what perspective they are expected to operationalise the concept.

The contemporary operationalisation of objectivity within journalism is, however, not original or limited to the field of journalism. It was a point of focus in philosophical debates for decades, and now has a multidisciplinary orientation within the academia and in practice (cf. Xavier, 2024; Unacademy, 2024).

A modern articulation of the concept within journalism and along the lines of objective science methodologies is, however, traceable to the writing of Walter Lippmann (1922) and later of Philip Meyer (1989). But the traditional origin of journalistic objectivity is still unclear. Schudson (2001) and Maras (2023) have, however, provided comprehensive accounts of the traditional origin of journalistic objectivity, as a norm, literary style, and a code of professional behaviour.

According to Schudson (2001), the economic-technological assumptions widely held for the emergence of journalistic objectivity as a practice norm lacks historical justification. The norm, he argues, grew out of "a social practice that incorporated a new model of objectivity" (p. 161) different from the political model that was earlier entrenched in the North American political landscape.

Maras' (2013: 38) critique of the 'Schudson-Schiller problem', while suggesting a multipronged historical paradigm and arguments - professionalisation, technology, commercialisation, political, legal, and other factors of social consciousness and change - for the traditional origin of objectivity in journalism, also admits of a problem in accurately dating journalistic objectivity by authors. He roots the challenge to the "variation between countries, but also the difficulty of establishing a clear timeline from the different arguments that have been put forward" (p. 38). He proposes rather a more nuanced and contextually-based arguments for its traditional origin.

Maras (2013), however, admits that it was only in the 1920s that objectivity became more commonly used in journalistic practice codes and in scholarship across Anglo-American societies. Hackett and Gurleyen (2015), additionally, argue that, "Historically, the American metropolitan daily newspaper and British public service broadcasting can be considered citadels of the objectivity regime" (p. 55), as faith in those citadels had eroded, caused by the impact of conglomeration, hypercommercialism, state authoritarianism, and the globalization of the media as well as other sociocultural and political currents that questioned the effectiveness of the media industries in general towards the actualization of the goals of citizenship.

While the early push for journalistic objectivity had waned between the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the emergent diversity of social movements across the world which required more advocacy and subjective storytelling strategies, objectivity's significance as a norm of practice in journalism re-surfaced prominently in the late-1990s, propelled still by a number of social forces, including media organisational frame of reference (Schudson, 2001/1978; Hull, 2024; Sonnemaker, 2015; Wien, 2017).

It is, however, the North American model of journalistic objectivity that has today come to dominate the global practice of journalism, providing the 'cornerstone' and 'cement' of professional reporting in liberal democracies, globally (Maras, 2013; De Beer, 2009).

Regardless of the historical divide one prefers to pitch his/her tent, the acceptability of objectivity as a practice norm in journalism is a contentious reality. There are arguments for and against the principle. Some of the core contentious issues are spelt out by Wallace (2019) and Maras (2013). The issues could be assessed, fundamentally, as part of the attempts to understand the relationship between the production and consumption of news

and how these impact on individuals and the public good.

Some authors (Schudson, 1978/2001; De Beer, 2009; Sachdev, 2019) favour journalistic objectivity as a set of reporting and editing practice that is based on an observable pattern of news writing. In this regard, objectivity is a moral ideal that journalists must strive towards in view of their dedication as employees of business corporations that depend on them for economic and political survival.

Sachdev's (2019) 'virtue-theoretic' perspective, in particular, sees objectivity as an ethical obligation that is binding and calls for actions and a life style that are characterised by rationality, discipline and moral character for the flourishing of the profession.

There is also the claim that objectivity is the source of journalistic legitimacy (Okunnu, 2018; Wien, 2017). Journalism, as it were, would lose its value and public respect if it were to disseminate falsehood and unreality. In this regard, the concept of 'truth' in relation to the representation of reality cannot be separated from the pursuit of journalistic objectivity.

Hull (2024) and Wallace (2019) are also in agreement that fidelity to objectivity would affirm and grant authority to journalists to question any institution or sets of facts within their areas of expertise. In this regard, objectivity would function as a guarantor of the acceptability of news reports by audiences and trust in the credibility of the reporters themselves.

Williams and Stroud (2020) also argue that, apart from enabling news cooperations to survive through economic hard times, journalistic objectivity allows space for audiences to bring their personal and contextual experiences to bear on news interpretations, meanings, and receptions.

As noted by Clark (2015), interpreting the facts behind the stories on their own terms, unaffected by any external opinions in relation to the facts or events, assists audiences to make up their own minds about the veracity of the stories. The

recipients' interpretative perspective is, thus, a key validator of the significance of objectivity in journalism.

Sonnemaker (2015) ties the importance of journalistic objectivity to the social contract role of journalists. The author argues that for journalists to perform this role in a democratic society wherewith citizens are better informed to make decisions and contribute meaningfully to the formulations of public policies, journalists must report news objectively. The author contends that "the health of any democratic society depends on the quality of information available to its citizens" (p. 7), which makes the endorsement of objective reporting inevitable.

Maras (2013), however, details four good reasons why objectivity in journalism matters. First, it cements the relationship between journalism and democratic governance, whereby it functions as "a bulwark against authoritarianism and obscurantism" (p. 11) by advocating dialogic democracy that advances rationality in politics and equal access to facts in the interest of the public.

Second, objectivity plays a significant role in the integration and management of "media power" (in its diversified forms) through the deployment of the appropriate professional standards, allowing for public discourses to be best managed through objective information that is devoid of sensationalism and also makes a healthy interaction between the 'elite' and the 'popular' press possible.

Third, objectivity is helpful in evaluating media performance. In view of the increasing negative criticisms against the media, journalistic objectivity does provide "an active criterion" (p. 13) for the assessment and advancement of media performance, so as to reestablish and sustain trustworthiness in relation to specific media platforms.

Fourth, objectivity does provide the ethics needed to guide the selections of news sources, events considered as newsworthy, the application of news

values, and the web of facts needed for the construction of news stories to guarantee fairness and justice for all the parties in news stories. In this regard, objectivity operates as a criterion of judgement, enabling the handling of disputed claims from the different parties in news, to avoid any occupational hazard that may arise through bad judgment.

In spite of these positive arguments for journalistic objectivity, numerous arguments against it also abound in the literature. The core argument is that, regardless of their individual commitments to professionalism, reporters and media managers are still human beings who have unique experiences and stakes in sociocultural and political processes of their local communities and/or media organisations. To expect them to hold out a level of objectivity that is superhuman is not only unrealistic but unfair (Williams and Stroud, 2020).

There are also arguments that identify numerous problems concerning the implementation of journalistic objectivity at the practical level and question its possibility. Wien (2017: 4), for example, argues that, because there are now different journalistic schools and theoretical traditions that inform the operationalisation of the concept in the day-to-day tasks of journalists, it is difficult to have a single technique of news gathering and construction, which makes a unified operationalisation of journalistic objectivity across different traditions exceedingly difficult.

Willaims and Stroud (2020), in turn, admit that there is always an unequal power dynamic in the efforts to maintain balanced perspectives in reporting. Often, the tilt of power in news is towards the position of the powerful and the rich – both in words and contexts. This way, the public is at a risk of influence to see and believe only the words and responses the rich and powerful provide for issues of public significance.

De Beer (2009) questions if all journalists actually understand what journalistic objectivity entails and the kind of expectation required in relation to its concrete application. He also raises concern about the confusion surrounding the actual professional status of this principle. For him, "objectivity does not equal a professional tradition. Instead, it frequently involves a routine post hoc rationale by which journalists justify their professional behavior and activity" (2009: 170). It is, therefore, an organisational imperative by which journalists are required to perform their work.

For Wallace (2019), the entry of 'alternative facts' language into journalism lexicon is also a challenge on objectivity. The new language tends to highlight the fact that neutrality may not be possible when reporting on issues that touch on humanity and rights, since such reports call forth the presentations of alternative facts by journalists. As the author indicates, 'alternative facts' is a phrase that has brought the absoluteness of the principle of objectivity into question.

Since the language is inherently subjective, biased, and opinionated particularly when it has to do with presenting viewpoints in reports opposed to official accounts, it challenges the view of 'truth' as absolute. The author is of the view that 'alternative facts' language calls for "a journalism that rigorously pursued verifiable facts while claiming a moral stance, fighting back against racism and authoritarianism" (p. 2) as a way to rebuild trust with audiences.

A few other criticisms have also been raised by a number of scholars (Taflinger, 1996; Maras, 2013; Schudson, 2001) about the applicability of the concept in reporting particular news 'beats'. Scholars are of the view that certain news report situations pose challenges for being objective. Reporting crisis situations, war, political campaigns, gender, race, ethnicity and sport, for instance, would require some form of subjective inputs. Editorial news decisions as well as decisions concerning what news materials to use or video and photographic shots to display, even during a broadcast media presentation, would also require subjective judgements of the editors and their reporters (Taflinger, 1996; De Beer, 2009).

The challenge of reality television and 'infotainment' programming as well as the emergent social media technologies provide

another perspective for the negative criticism of journalistic objectivity (Hackett & Gurleyen, 2015; Williams & Stroud, 2020; Lievrouw, 2015). Since reality television and infotainment programmes are largely dramatic and relay information in a partisan way to gain popularity, they bring the traditional notion of the neutral transfer of facts into scrutiny.

Again, because social media tend to polarise the traditional boundaries of social formations across societies and bring about the segmentation of news audiences, their news contents generally tilt towards bias.

These and many other criticisms of journalistic objectivity, it is argued, call for honest and more nuanced conversations about the limits of the concept; as well as whether its operationalisation, as it currently stands, is the right frame for journalism today; as its current form somewhat tends to affect the representations of the interests of minority and marginalised groups. It is also an opportunity to look again at how best news stories could be framed today to assist progress in the sustainable development programmes of governments across communities.

These arguments, however, call for the introduction of a third frame of reference – the alternative and community media perspective - in conversations about journalistic objectivity, which could help provide a template for the reassessment of journalistic objectivity for wider acceptability and stronger impact.

The Community Media Perspective:

Community broadcasting is a *genre* of the alternative media practice. Skjerdal's (2012) three streams of alternative journalism in Africa - journalism for social change, communal journalism, and journalism inspired by oral discourse – notwithstanding, the alternative media sector is a much more diversified form of media practice, in terms of ideology, forms, and format.

Atton's *Problems and positions in alternative and community media* (2015), for example, provides a compendium of its core paradigms and

complexities. Hackett and Gurleyen (2015) also offer a focused exploration of "the orientation of alternative media to journalism objectivity" (p. 54) from its contending viewpoints.

Generally, alternative and community journalists constitute a group of media practitioners that operate outside the mainstream and at the interstices of capitalist and elite dominant professionalised media. Only in a few cases is the practice tied around radical social movements that are historically or culturally bound (Downing, 2001) or work as 'hybrid' media to established professional media outlets through user-generated contents (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

Their activities, in their diversified forms and formats, are centrally about social and cultural productions "that enable people to participate directly in the organization, production and distribution of their own media, and how these media are used to construct and represent identity and community, as well as forms of information and knowledge that are under-represented, marginalized or ignored by other, more dominant media" (Atton, 2015: 1).

Scholars admit that alternative and community media practitioners have recognised the moral and political significance of journalistic objectivity and are, to some extent, committed to realising it in practice (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Hackett & Gurleyen, 2015). They tend, through their practices, to interrogate and institutionalise notions of truth, reality, objectivity, expertise, authority and credibility (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Thus, the ideology and the ethical norm of objectivity has remained a fundamental issue even in the field of alternative and community media, just as it is within the mainstream.

However, members of the group, driven by their distinctive emancipatory ethical and political orientations, are also advocating for a stronger affirmation of social justice in journalism in its diversified forms, challenging the rigorous demands of journalistic objectivity, in view of the prevailing structures of oppression, inequality and injustices across societies. They are also, in

varying ways, proposing alternative paths to the operationalisation of journalistic objectivity – through the adoption of 'true objectivity' or the integration of advocacy, solution, collaborative, investigative, and interpretative forms of reporting into news reportage.

Atton and Hamilton (2008), for example, identify alternative media with a form of journalism that privileges a close affinity with the notions of social responsibility, working to replace the ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy.

Bailey et al.'s (2008) analysis of the 'rhizomatic' alternative media points to the form of alternative media that is fluid in location but whose practice orientations draw strength from the creations of intersections and collaborations across movements and struggles, with a view towards the destabilisation of the certainties of the professionalised media. The collaborative production agenda of alternative media work best in that context.

A wide range of authors (e.g. Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Atton & Hamilton, 2008) also admit that the stance of alternative media practitioners who yearn for the reintegration of value-based reporting into the contemporary practice of objectivity, is germane as well as morally and politically correct, requiring sustained commitment. While promoting active citizenship, their advocacy also brings to bear on the fact-centred strategies of professionalised media some form of ethical issues and commitments that contemporary journalism requires, particularly in the area of sustained editorial independence from the state and the market, and reduced openness to political patronage that could compromise journalistic integrity (Okon, 2014).

The desire of alternative and community journalists, essentially, is for the concept to be 'revisited' to provide a progressive voice that aligns ultimately with its overall democratic and emancipatory impulses (Hackett & Gurleyen, 2015). It advocates for an inclusive framework that is grounded on moral and sociocultural exigencies and bears the interests of minority and marginalised groups in view, which could also provide a counterbalance to the often 'slant' storytelling orientations of the official and elite-centred dominant media's coverage of social events.

By also canvassing for explicit foregrounding of the viewpoints and experiences of 'ordinary' citizens in mainstream storytelling, alternative journalists are poised to emphasise the kind of visibility minority groups and communities deserve in the media as well as offer the kind of practical strategy needed to actualise balance and impartiality amidst the drive for rigorous objectivity of the elite-expert media.

Atton and Hamilton (2008), in particular, admit that even in its rejection of patronage and extensive advertising as possible threats to an inclusive and balanced communication, the vision of alternative and community media in the organisation of objectivity in the media is very clear, thus:

alternative media emphasize a humanistic set of journalistic values that are far removed from either the scientistic attempts at objective reporting or the persistence of the ideological necessity of objectivity. Alternative journalists enact social-responsibility journalism with an important difference (p. 87).

There are, however, a few challenges to the revisionist agenda of the alternative media groups in relation to the objectivity question. Hackett and Gurleyen's (2015), for example, point to the lack of consensus among the alternative journalists themselves, which creates frameworks for disagreements within their camps regarding their post-objectivity proposal. Given their niche constituencies and diversity of interests, alternative media journalists, especially those with ardent affiliations to the 'geographic' or 'restricted' or 'contextual' political interests of the smaller communities and particular political organisations they serve, favour a kind of 'contextual objectivity' (Hackett & Gurleyen, p. 57) that is parochially-specific. In this regard, they tend to work to open up a floodgate for a coalition

of opposition to undermine the post-objectivity project of the alternative media and their allies within a given society.

Kperogi's (2013) dimension focuses on the varying responses of the hegemonic media, especially in the US, to the contemporary repudiation of journalistic objectivity and the rationales behind some of those responses. For the author, the responses which are very much on the positive, signal both a return to journalism's roots and a 'less than open' but profit-inspired acceptance of the inclusive ideals and integrative position of alternative journalism.

The author argues that this containment particularly from the hegemonic media is "actuated by the imperatives of survival in an increasingly uncertain and fragmented media market, made even more so by the unexampled discursive democracy and diversity that the Internet has enabled…" (p. 48).

The focus of acceptance is, therefore, not on the interests of the citizens, but on the market. Besides, such acceptance may sometimes work to contradict the 'not-for-profit' vision or lead to the collapse or near collapse of the reformist agenda of community media (Okon, 2014: 162).

These challenges, among others, provide a wakeup call and an invitation for alternative and community media journalists to re-exam both the contradictions and constraints within their ranks and how these can affect the utilisation of even a 'revisionist model' of journalistic objectivity for sustainable development purposes.

Objectivity and Sustainable Development:

The basic connections between journalistic objectivity, community media, and sustainable development could be gleaned from the points of view of the key philosophical ideas that often underpin and drive the debates on scientific objectivity, media ethics. and sustainable development. These include positivism, existentialism, and pragmatism, just to mention a few. These philosophical frameworks have, in many ways, provided the general principles that shape and reshape some of the arguments about journalistic objectivity and its implications for the structuring or restructuring of public communication and sustainable development initiatives and goals across societies.

Existentialism:

Existentialism with its life world context, on the one hand, rejects the objective stance of natural science to focus more on the importance of subjective human experiences to the construction of meanings. It offers a philosophical approach that is person- and value-centred (Weeks, 2014).

Within the context of sustainable development, existentialism supports man's freedom and ability to make decisions and ethical choices that would shape his/her life, rather than uncritically accept values handed down by authorities. In other words, man should not be seen simply as part of a historical process; but rather as a free person who has responsibility to give meaning to his life, one way or the other.

It is only the fear of failing, often associated with the use of absolute freedom in personal choices (or what Kierkegaard calls the 'existential angst'), that could create the impulse to shift that personal responsibility unto another who then makes the decisions on one's behalf, which should not naturally be the case.

Husserl, however, took a more systematic approach that also helped in resolving the problem around Kierkegaard's 'existential angst'. He advised that in making moral decisions about social realities, man must move away from the 'noumenal' or objective world and concentrate rather on the 'phenomenal' or subjective world that we experience.

This approach, later known as 'phenomenology', put aside the problem of the independent existence of our objects of awareness and examines instead the only thing we can be sure of knowing – Husserl's *Lebenswelt* or 'the life world' (Weeks, 2014: 298). Thus, by focusing attention on the 'world we live in' and the first-person experience of that world and what it means to have that

experience, the nature of our consciousness of development issues would become more real and distinctive.

Positivism:

As a byproduct of the widening gap between science and philosophy and how both could be drawn upon to make sense of religion, positivism, on the other hand, rejects rationalism or metaphysical speculation as the path to human knowledge about reality and establishes 'scientific enquiry' as the only authentic path to a valid knowledge.

Positivism, therefore, offers a scientific fact-based way to knowledge, whose legitimacy rests on the principles of observation, the use of scientific methodologies for the discovery of truths about reality, theory formation, and the verification of facts about reality (Park et al., 2020; Turner, 2001).

Regardless of its identified weaknesses (Fuller, 2001; Editors of Britannica, 2010), modern positivism has broad positive implications to diverse fields of study and professional practices, including developmental study and practice. Generally, positivism has introduced more objective research criteria and produced empirically-based results through large surveys and experimental methods (Ellul, 2023).

Through its scientific investigation and verification approach, positivist researchers offer immeasurable bases for the understanding of human behaviour patterns and the complexities in human cultures and how these could shape and reshape social interactions and well-being.

The impact of modern positivism within the field of development and sustainability studies has also been analysed within scholarship across, at least, three more broad areas:

(i) how postmodernist reproachment of positivism now opens up positivism to subjective truth-telling across disciplines, to encourage the engagements of truth tellers whose stories could break down the walls of injustices and inequality across societies (Ali & Chowdhury, 2015);

(ii) the monetary-assets disparity perspective, which admits that positivism favours a monetary approach and the physical betterment of a society through market calculations of gains; and leaves aside the issues of distributive justice and environmental assets that are significant to any discourse on development; and

(iii) the positive psychology perspective, which focuses on character traits and their effects on human motivation and well-being, as well as figures out how an individual can elevate his/her well-being by developing and manifesting positive qualities and behaviours (Ellul, 2023: 3), or how education could assist the development of "personal strengths of character", especially "competencies for sustainability" across the different parameters of sustainable development (Vazquez-Marin et al., 2023: 1-2).

Pragmatism:

Pragmatism, in turn, places premium on the practical application of ideas and the significance of common-sense experience in shaping knowledge about reality. This was in response to the universalising tendencies of positivism (Arora-Jonsson, 2023). Even policy decisions must be evaluated in terms of the visibility of their practical consequences. Thus, for pragmatists like C. S. Peirce and William James, philosophical enquiry (and by extension, developmental discourses) should be concerned with conceptions that are practically useful and based on common-sense experience; not only on objective certainties. It is such resulting practical decisions and actions that would make a belief or an idea on development true.

Norton (1999: 460-61), however, admits that while pragmatism has offered an alternative approach to knowledge and problem-solving, it has also provided valuable insights into adaptability procedures in goal-seeking paradigm

to development. Within this context, pragmatism could function as an analogical tool for the definition and characterisation of development and sustainability issues; as an approach for resolving the fact-value dichotomy in development discourses; and as a mechanism within adaptive management for resolving environmental problems (Norton, 1999).

Its weaknesses (Talisse, 2014), however, highlight the need for critical reflections and ethical considerations in applying pragmatic principles to complex developmental issues.

The greatest value of pragmatism to sustainable development however, rests on its provision of a conceptual framework for the building of a community that is forward-looking and provides predictive guidance and counseling support to development planners who use scientific methods to fine-tune the understanding of their development goals and policies (Norton, 1999).

In this regard, the community, drawing resources from its active social experimentation and learning that are not definable in advance (but are 'evolving' based on social and ecological necessities), would function to provide interesting frameworks for decisions on what constitutes 'truth' within the context of its development plans and sustainable goals.

Methods of The Study:

The study was qualitatively designed. The qualitative approach used was case study. The methods of investigation adopted were oral interview and documentary study.

The initial plan was to hold focused group discussions across two community radio stations and one within an academic centre. But that plan had to change on the discovery that a number of the recently-licensed community radios did not have up to three active staff members present at the stations at a time. So, the researchers chose to have oral interviews with the managers/directors of selected licensed community radio stations, as well as with the Executive Secretary of the *Nigerian Community Radio Coalition* (NCRC),

the coordinating body for community media in the country.

The interviews were conducted using telephone and WhatsApp messaging platforms. These platforms were chosen for a number of reasons: to speed up contacts and responses; to ensure accurate representations of interviewees' responses; and to enable the researchers to bypass the prevailing insecurity challenges in the country by not traveling far distances by road to the localities where the radio stations are physically domiciled.

Those interviewed were Mr. Akin Akingbulu of NCRC (Lagos); Mr. Ibrahim Pam, the Manager of *AMARC FM* (Abuja, FCT); Chief Ogbu Ego, the General Manager of *Choice FM* (Agba Community Radio, Benue State); and Mr. Friday Adeba, the Manager of the *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja, Cross River State). The focus was principally on the geographic community radio sector because the country does not have any functional geographic community television at the moment.

The interviewees were first contacted through direct phone conversations to seek out their consents for participation in the research; and then a set of questions relating to the objectives of the study were sent to them, after their consents were duly obtained. Their responses were received either as 'voice' or 'written' messaging. Voice messages were then transcribed to draw out raw data for the research. Empirical data so obtained were subsequently analysed and interpreted, using the descriptive research strategy.

Findings and Discussion:

The empirical data and discussions thereof are presented below to correspond to the five objectives of the study. The discussive aspect is driven by the need to connect empirical information with the literature review and theoretical framework of the research, so as to draw out general conclusions for the study.

i.   **How community media journalists feel about and value journalistic objectivity**.

Respondents expressed diverse views and feelings concerning the principle of journalistic objectivity and its applicability in Nigeria. Some expressed reservation about its value in contemporary newsrooms, in view of the prevailing attraction towards sensationalism in news. Others support the principle absolutely.

While the former sought a bridge among objective, narrative, and advocacy journalism as well as impact-based news, the latter argued that journalists, as social beings, could hardly be isolated from emotional biases, belief systems, and personal experiences in reportage. They noted, however, that undue attachment to the subjective perspective could manifest in a number of ways, including the choice of words used in framing news. They accepted (at least in principle) that journalistic objectivity is an important concept and should be supported.

Ibrahim of *AMARC FM* (Abuja), for example, maintained that journalistic objectivity is a call to responsibility – "not to take sides either with the source or audience of a news story; but to report news in such a way that the story is not offensive and does not cause panic or any further damage to the society" (Interview, 2024). This implies that the journalist's job is to report the facts about society as they are; and allow the audience to make their decisions or judgements about the report.

Ibraham's view, though significant, seriously ignores the existentialist's value of common-sense experience in storytelling and the need to draw on the lifeworld context to support news narratives geared towards sustainable development.

A good number of journalists in Nigeria today, nevertheless, are still drawn towards sensational journalism. This, they do, in spite of the express demands of the Nigerian Press Council's *Ethical Code* and the National Broadcasting Commission's *Broadcasting Code* (2016) for objective reporting in the country. Interviewees admitted that the reason for this deficit hinges primarily on reporters' desire to break the news fast and to have screaming headlines. Some journalists do not want to go through the rigours of fact-finding and fact-checking before reporting.

Interestingly, this kind of urge for sensationalism in news, however, differs greatly from the subjective perspective supported by an existentialist worldview. While one seeks to benefit from quick public recognition and heightened capital; the other is concerned with the need to provide coverage for subjective considerations that are driven by the desire for justice and inclusion. Basically, the latter seeks to weave human emotions or politicised interests with honest and factual representation of social realities across societies for the purpose of fairness to all.

In this regard, it is argued, a lot still needs to be done by media executives to safeguard against the abuse of journalistic objectivity in the country, by consistently finding out how their journalists get their facts, how they package them and put across to their audiences.

As argued by Adeba of the *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja), "Everything has been politicised; it has become a matter for the highest bidder; and, it should not be so. It is important to go back to the basics" (Interview, 2024).

Akingbulu of NCRC also strongly advocated for "news accounts to be a kind of neutral grounds from which various interests can see fairness and have informed takeaways" (Interview, 2024). For him, journalistic objectivity is an important concept that should be supported. He argues that every reporting should aim "to stand in the middle and give voice to all the possible sides. Journalists' biases and opinions should stay away" (Interview, 2024).

Ego of *Choice FM* (Benue State), however, stressed the need for journalists in the country to be continuously sensitised and retrained to imbibe the fundamentals of objective journalism, in terms of factual, accurate and truthful reporting of events.

In spite of the diversities in opinions about objective journalism, community media

practitioners in Nigeria, in varying ways, accept and believe in journalistic objectivity. Some of them acknowledge being guided by it in their day-to-day media and communication practices. Some have also been influenced, not only by their professional trainings on objective reporting, but also by their practical experiences in the application of the ethical principle, first, at the mainstream media level before their subsequent experience of same at the community media terrain.

Ibrahim of *AMARC FM* (Abuja), for instance, has been a practising journalist since 1993 before moving into the community media sector; and, what has guided his practice over the years was the need to stay objective in his news reports. He noted, "I believe in it and that is the way to go. I have always been guided by that and I couldn't have gotten to the zenith of my career without reporting objectively. You can also see from the philosophy and concept of the magazine that I publish - *Distinct Plus News* – in which we have always been guided by journalistic objectivity, because we believe in it. That is the way to go, according to the training we received" (Interview, 2024).

With regard to the practicability of journalistic objectivity within the local context of each community radio, interviewees admitted that the ability to keep to the demand of the ethical principle varies from one local context of community broadcasting to another. A journalist operating in communities troubled by insurgency or banditry, for instance, may find it challenging to maintain balance and neutrality.

This finding agrees somewhat with Hackett and Gurleyen's (2015) claim of existing contextual differences in the practice of objective reporting across societies as well as the possible disagreement among the alternative journalists themselves as regards the extent of its application in a given context.

That notwithstanding, empirical evidence showed a lack of unified acceptance of journalistic objectivity among the community media practitioners in Nigeria. While majority (who were before, associates of the mainstream media) accepted it absolutely, a few others highlighted only its contextual relevance in allowing issues concerning local communities to be adequately addressed.

Though most of the respondents saw journalistic objectivity as a significant moral ideal that is inextricably bound with a requisite methodology for the attainment of success in sustainable development programmes within communities, they also strongly supported the need for a shift towards 'true objectivity' that integrates objective reporting with advocacy, solutions, collaborative, and impact-based journalism at both the procedural and ideological levels, and for the sake of justice and equity.

ii. **The significance of journalistic objectivity to sustainable development**.

Raw data showed an inextricable link between sustainable development programming and journalistic objectivity in Nigeria. The two issues were addressed simultaneously by respondents. Interviewees, generally, acknowledged that journalistic objectivity holds enormous significance to sustainable development as exemplified in figure 1 below. A proper articulation of this connection does, however, require the understanding of how news reports relate with the lived realities of communities and the ideas and learning processes that shape development discourses and decisions across contexts.
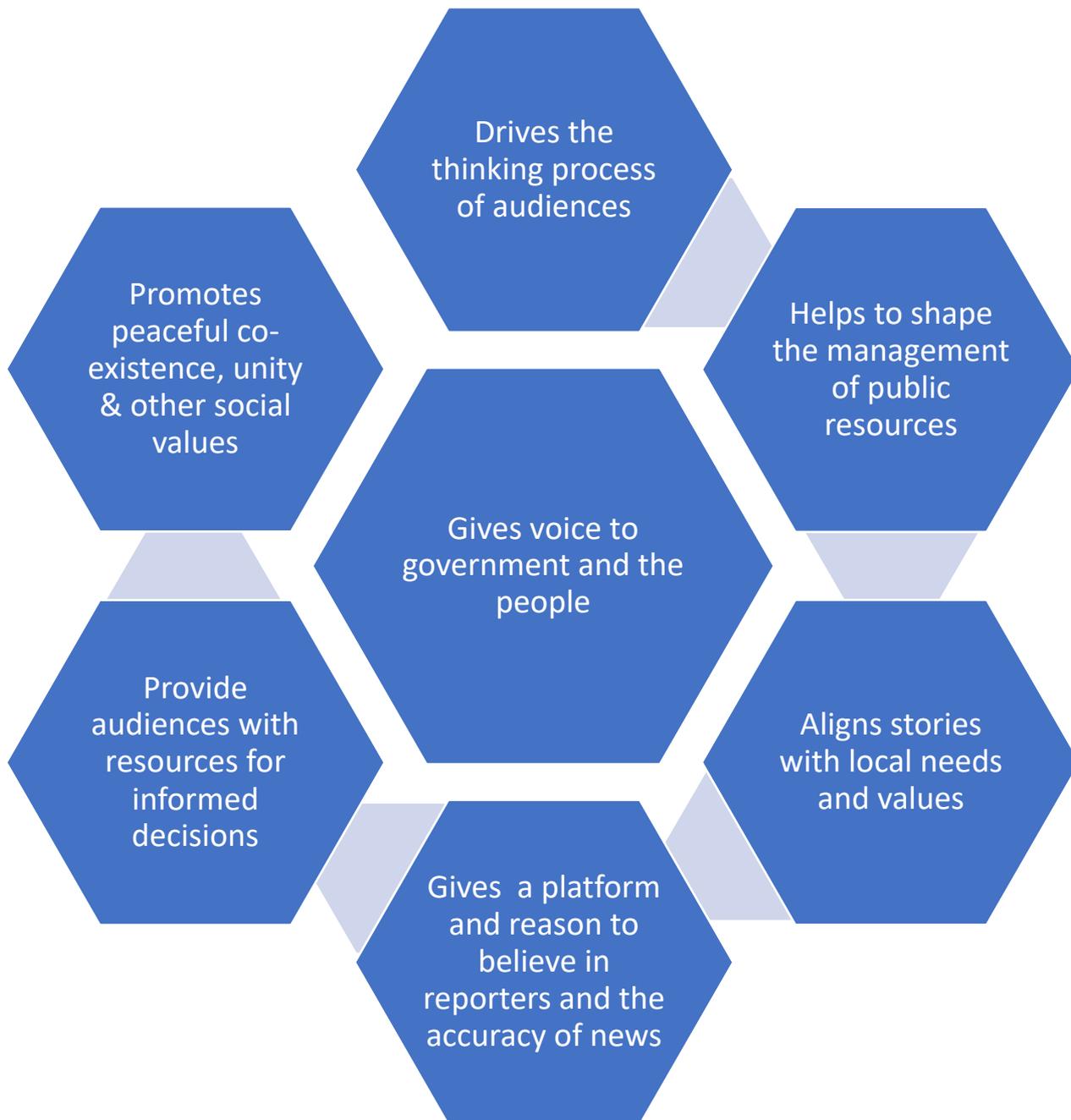
Figure 1: Significance

Akingbulu of NCRC (Lagos), for instance, noted that when journalists present the facts, ensure accuracy and balance in their news contents by giving voice to both the citizens and government sources, it contributes to bringing about perspectives and accountability in governance and helps to shape the management of public resources for the benefit of the present and future generations of the citizens.

Interestingly, and as envisaged in the *cultural constructivism* theory, such accuracy in reportage can happen only when journalists remain subjectively conscious of the fact that their news narratives cannot be entirely neutral (but should actively bear out the social constructs of the communities they serve) and then strive to bring their stories to align with those local needs and values. Once that consciousness and commitment are evident, it is argued, media reporters can strive, even unconsciously, for a certain level of accuracy in their reports so as to align with local situations without compromising integrity.

Objectivity, according of Ibrahim of *AMARC FM* (Abuja), also provides the audience of a community media station with the platform and reason to believe that the reporter knows that whatever he or she is telling them about development issues is objective. The essence is to drive their thinking processes towards sustainable development across a number of areas. The audience would need to believe the reporter's stories, for instance, about how man interacts with the ecosystem; or how man can live peacefully with his fellow men; or how the unity within communities can be sustained.

Where there are social security issues, Ibrahim noted, the audience would also want to believe that the reporters' analysis of the problem is accurate. When this happens, the interviewee argued, the audience would have the resources for informed decisions in relation to these issues; and that what helps them to reach that informed decision is the knowledge that the reports they receive from their local media are factual. Ibrahim further argued that the ethics of objectivity in journalism has a lot to do with sustainable development; "because if there's no objectivity, there's nowhere factual knowledge and informed decisions about development issues can be sustained" (Interview, 2024).

Ego of *Choice FM* (Benue State) was also of the view that journalistic objectivity is significant to sustainable development, "because it promotes peace; and peace is at the centre of every human and social development. No society can develop without peace; and when biases, subjective prejudices or emotional perspectives are dominant in news, it is a bad referral for crisis, which cannot support development. Peace is the central requirement for development and, therefore, the necessary consequence for sustaining objectivity in reportage" (Interview, 2024).

Other social values that objectivity in reportage promotes, Ego noted, are unity and social collaboration, which are also the consequences of peaceful co-existence. He argues that "objectivity in news reports ensures that the radio station continuously enjoys the support of the local community; and, it has also led to the unification of people across many divides. It's like the reason many people continue to support and contribute to the sustainability of the community radio" (Interview, 2024).

Ultimately, the ethics of objectivity is inextricably bound to the understanding and appreciation of sustainable development in Nigeria, because if there is no objectivity, there will be no peace and no 'sustainability' in relation to development programing in the country. A proper articulation of this connection is, however, possible and meaningful when guided by applicable philosophical frameworks that drive development considerations across contexts, such as existentialism, positivism, pragmatism, etc.

iii.   **The level of achievement in sustainable development made possible by the principle of objectivity in journalism**.

Respondents accepted that journalistic objectivity has enabled some levels of practical achievements in relation to sustainable development within the local communities where their community radio stations are domiciled (See figure 2 below). They acknowledged, however, that the list of achievements could not be exhausted within the limited space for this report. Respondents observed, firstly, that listeners are always happy to hear objective news reports on their community radio stations about development issues; and, secondly, that "the best way to go is for journalists to report what they see and report it as they hear it" (Ego, Interview, 2024).

Figure 2: Areas of Achievement vis-à-vis Sustainable Development

Adeba of *Ubuntu community radio* (Ogoja), for example, was vehement that because of the common identification of their people with a commitment to truth and honesty, "it is important to report stories the way they are" (Interview, 2024). He acknowledged the role of their community radio station in resolving some crisis within their community and its environs, because of the objective news approach it adopts. Through fact-based reporting on the Cross River and Ebonyi interstate crisis and the effects of other political initiatives, for instance, peace has been restored to the border communities across the two states.

Again, the radio station's objective enlightenment of their people on immunisation, he stated, has

helped to resolve some pending communal health issues in Ugaga, Yala Local Government Area. Adeba noted, "We brought the people to come and discuss the issues objectively at our station; and, it helped solve the crises" (Interview, 2024).

Critically, the experience of the *Ubuntu community radio* is, in many ways, a good illustration of how community media outlets could shift their narratives to align with local situations without compromising integrity. This, again, is a powerful illustration of how a community radio could contribute to the building of a community that is forward-looking, contributing through predictive arguments and counselling proposals offered to development planners to help build bridges for peace across affected communities (cf.

Norton, 1999). Drawing resources, therefore, from the indigenous knowledge systems and the mediated social interactive frameworks available to them, it is argued, community media (wherever they are located) have the ability to contribute, through their predictive and counselling proposals, to a meaningful and peaceful co-existence across communities.

Ego of *Choice FM* (Benue State) also admitted that journalistic objectivity has helped to build trust and bring the people closer to the community radio station and also to the government, and vice versa. In particular, it has enabled the people within the communities to trust the government. The mere fact that there is a platform for the spread of authentic and objective information where the people are educated about government policies without undue subjective influence, can help draw the people to trust in government's development policy actions.

Ego, additionally, observed that government would need to deepen that trust enabled through objective reporting, when community members see government's development policies and programmes actually translated to concrete realities, such as a timely provision of borehole water, construction and rehabilitation of roads, regular supports for agricultural projects, health care, and so forth.

Ego insisted that the faith built through accurate news reports must be reinforced by what the people can see on ground as concrete expressions of their government's commitment to its development programmes. In his words, "When people see what is happening in their communities, and put a logical connection between it and the objective messages they had received from their local media stations, they would tend to trust government; and then, it would become easier for them to use the community radio stations domiciled within their communities to reach out to other members of the public to

collaborate with the government" (Interview, 2024).

This is a good illustration of how a pragmatic perspective could bear out on community development. News reports on development issues must have practical consequences to be successful and to grow trust. In this regard, sustaining a pragmatic interpretation of news in relation to sustainable development will work best to strengthen the people's faith in the development programmes of their government. Growing a trustful relationship between the people and their government is, therefore, not only about factual reporting, but also how the reports bear out concretely in improving the living conditions of the people.

Most importantly, respondents were also of the view that journalistic objectivity has placed the decision-making power with individuals, local leaders, and the communities. They argued that when there is an empathetic listening effort and deep engagements with verified facts made available to them by journalists, local leaders and civil society organisations across communities could develop a higher level of attention to the developmental plights of their local communities. The result will be a profound and sustained engagements of the stakeholders in proffering solutions that are homegrown, empathetic, and rooted in the needs and aspirations of the people to address their specific developmental problems - solutions that are driven by the people themselves and are based principally on factual reporting available to them.

These are, therefore, some identifiable and verifiable achievements that the application of journalistic objectivity has brought, or could bring to bear on local communities and their community radio stations, thus, enabling the radio stations to mediate and bring local communities to trust and cooperate with their governments to bring progress to the communities. They are, essentially,

about the joy associated with honesty and standing for the truth, building trust between government and the people, as well as placing decision-making power for home-grown and empathetic solutions to social problems within communities.

iv. **The constraints to the acceptability and application of journalistic objectivity vis-à-vis sustainable development in Nigeria.**

Respondents admitted that there are existing difficulties that they face daily in drawing upon journalistic objectivity to drive the momentum for sustainable development in their communities or in applying the demands of the ethical principle.

Ownership interest and sponsorship of community radio stations, which could derail any efforts at editorial independence and objective reporting, is identified as the first challenge. Respondents were of the view that "different stakeholders, even within the community radio sector, may have competing interests, making it difficult to agree on what constitutes objective criteria for decision-making" (Ibrahim, Interview, 2024).

Adeba of *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja), for instance, observed that there are two major political parties holding the reins in their community. If the radio station reports on the candidate of one political party, the other will accuse the station of bias. While ownership of the radio station may not in any way align with any of the political parties, its acceptance of programme sponsorship from any candidate could still trigger an accusation of lack of editorial independence against the station.

In this regard, what the radio station does is to give equal opportunities to all parties and limit sponsorship of programmes with political undertones, in order to avoid being accused of bias in favour of a candidate. Adeba maintained that political agenda and external influences can skew journalistic objectivity through community media if not properly managed, or when certain interests are prioritised over a balanced assessment of community needs.

There is also the complexity tied around the multifaceted nature of issues involved in community development challenges. Since this complexity is often addressed through different phases of sustainable development planning, it is sometimes difficult to isolate objective factors from subjective influences in their reportage. Some individuals and organisations, for instance, might unconsciously bring their biases and subjectivity to bear on their perceptions of issues and, thus, dominate debates and decisions on sustainable development programming. This could make it challenging to maintain true objectivity in reporting such developments.

Respondents argued that when personal experiences and emotions becloud judgments in relation to development plans and programming, as it is sometimes the case within local communities, it could lead to decisions that are driven, not by objective analysis of the issues, but coloured by sentiments and the desire for subjective power influence. Such subjective orientations, respondents acknowledged, could emerge from a number of sources, including personal experience of social realities, political pressures, clandestine political agenda, and other conflicts of interests within a given community. In most cases, however, the injection of sentimental elements into development plans, respondents noted, are pushed through by politicians who have their hidden agenda in relation to certain development projects. In such a situation, interviewees observed, objective reporting would face a challenge; moreso, if the reporter is a member of the community or has the interests of a particular political group to protect.

Respondents further observed that when seen from the perspective of ethical relativism which recognises and respects the unique values and specific norms of local communities, reporting on

issues that align with their relativistic views, and also maintain the required objective standards, would be challenging.

Overcoming this constraint, interviewees admitted, would require the adoption of alternative approaches "that can create more meaningful connection between the news and the expectations of the local communities" (Ibrahim, Interview, 2024). This way, the interpretation of news data by members of the communities would foster greater engagements with local values and specific norms for development; thus, making the local media more relevant to the needs of the people.

There is also the problem of limited access to reliable and comprehensive data, which can hinder objective analysis of a community's needs and resources through community media. This could be in the form of limited demographic information about a particular community or how members of that community perceive issues of development. Where comprehensive data is inadequate, respondents admitted, there would be a resultant negative effect on objective analysis of the community, its needs and resources for decision-making.

For Ego of *Choice FM* (Benue State), the biggest challenge in the practical application of journalistic objectivity is in the area of voluntarism, especially the building of the capacity of their volunteers, who are mostly nonprofessionals in mass communication, but have willingly offered to serve the community radio. Ego acknowledged that getting them to engage in objective reporting takes time and energy; and some may still not be able to do it as expected. Thus, while the normative demands of objectivity in journalism are practicable within their local context, getting the volunteers to practise it effectively would require regular training. The solution for now, Ego noted, "lies in

their regular on-the-job or inhouse training" (Interview, 2024).

Choice FM's experience, critically justifies Vazquez-Marin et al. (2023) and Ellul's (2023) distinctive emphasis on the values of education and positive psychology. As elements of positivism, they are valuable to the development and manifestation of 'competencies for sustainability' and other positive qualities in relation to development communication decisions and planning.

Seen particularly from the point of view of Vazquez-Marin et al. (2023), it could be argued that where education and training thrive, it would help to grow "personal strengths of character" and "virtues" whose outcomes would be positive reactions to environmental situations and news reporting behaviour; and in a way that promotes the overall well-being of a given society.

Adeba of *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja), however, indicated that their major challenge, among others, is access to the working tools, as well as lack of requisite funding, which sometimes forces them into the commercialisation of news. Interviewees argued that the establishment of funding and grant systems for community-based media could support objective reporting particularly in underserved areas and communities.

Other challenges listed are tied around the ability of practitioners to create a bridge that connects participatory, narrative, solutions, collaborative and impact reporting, and the application of each within the context of community media practices. As argued by Ibrahim of *AMARC FM* (Abuja), political pressures on community radio, with sources in local politics and social movements, could affect practitioners' views on social events, forcing them to take a stand in favour of advocacy journalism rather than objective reporting of an event. In this regard, reporters' ability to blend the strategies of objective reporting with other writing

formats could help resolve the challenge, thus, enabling the reporters to still tell compelling stories relevant to the needs of their communities.

v. **Ways by which the challenges could be mitigated for a better practice of journalistic objectivity vis-à-vis sustainable development in Nigeria**.

A number of factors and strategies were highlighted by interviewees as capable of mitigating the constraints on the practice of journalistic objectivity in Nigeria and to better position the ethical principle to assist sustainable development programming in the country (See figure 3 below).
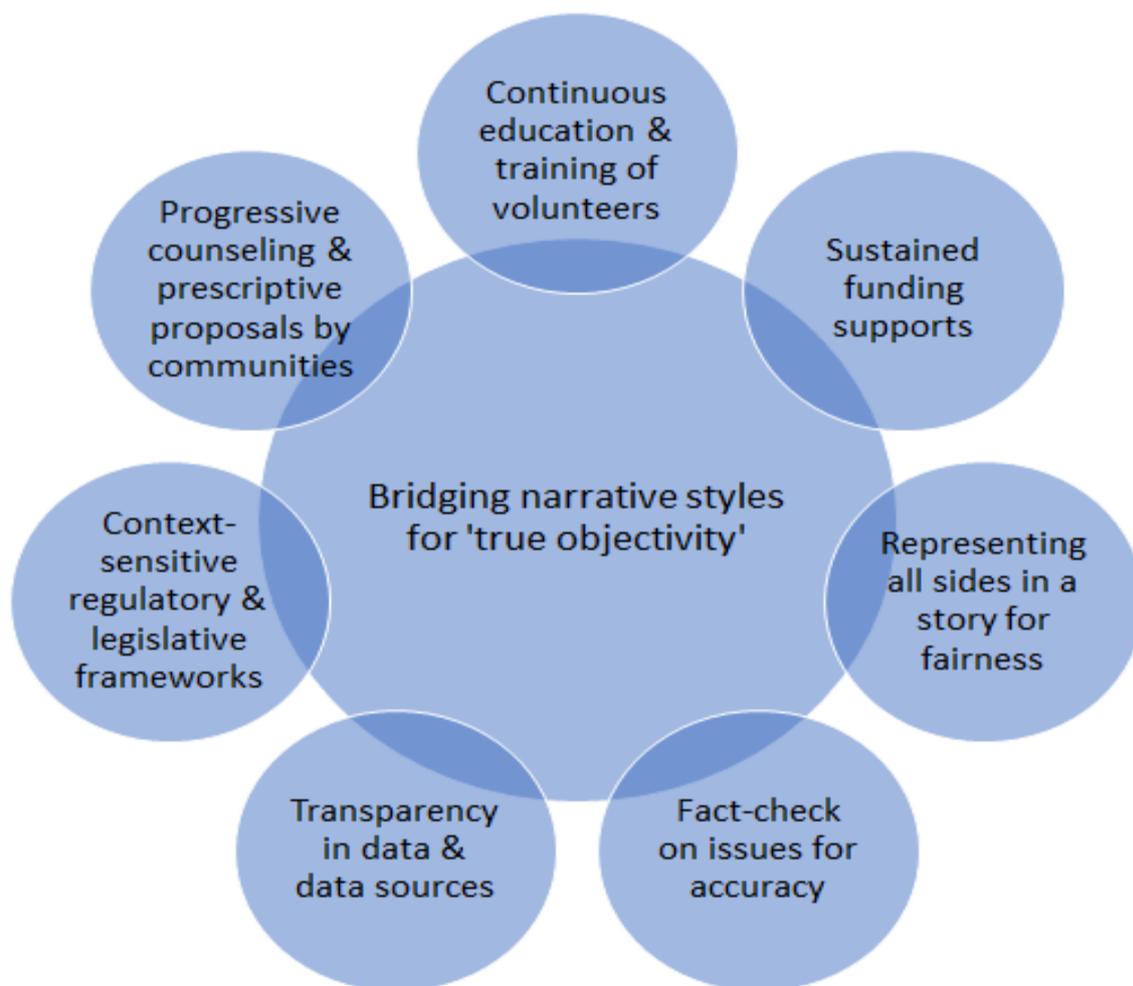
Figure 3: Mitigating Factors

The need to continuously train and educate reporters to provide them with the requisite skills to enhance their ability in ethical and objective reporting towards the promotion of sustainable development within communities was strongly advocated. Adeba of *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja), for example, was insistent that putting

professionalism first through training for ethical journalism is the way for community radio stations to contribute towards promoting development in their local communities; and, "then everything else follows" (Interview, 2024).

Ibrahim of *AMARC FM* (Abuja) shares a similar perspective. For him, a lot of the challenges

confronting community media in Nigeria in relation to objective reporting, could be resolved through ongoing education of reporters. This, again, aligns with the view of positivist researchers about the importance of education to the growth of the required qualities to improve individual's responses to social realities (Vazquez-Marin et al., 2023). This is in addition to a commitment to personal discipline and the inculcation of a sense of responsibility in reportage.

To illustrate his point, Ibrahim noted that he has personally refused to engage in quackery; but preferred to use the professional tools available to him such as fact checking tools to bypass some of the challenges, saying "I have never practised quackery and I have never been found wanting in that aspect. I have always been committed to objective reporting as a journalist. I know what it entails. I get my facts; I check my facts; and I verify them using all the tools available to me. Media practitioners must live above board at all times." (Interview, 2024).

Another way to reposition community media for fairness and justice towards sustainable development, according to Adeba of *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja), is to represent all sides in a story. For him, where ownership interest or political sponsorship would affect editorial independence of a radio station or impartiality in reportage, the parties to such reports should be given equal opportunities to air their views. Also, any financial supports that could potentially tilt news slants in favour of one party against the other should be rejected or limited as much as possible. Adeba maintained that such approach is also a useful way to reduce the pressures of the market and segmented audiences on community radio.

Respondents were also of the view that addressing the funding challenge to the community broadcasting experience in Nigeria could provide another strategy for mitigating the constraints on community media and better position the practice

towards the promotion of sustainable development programming.

Ego of *Choice FM* (Benue State), for example, noted that their community radio has benefited enormously from the activities of community media funds, organised and supported by "Blue Berg" and "Ford Foundation". Those activities were organised by *HIVOS People Unlimited* in Kenya and coordinated by *Centre for Media and Society* (CEMESO) in Nigeria. The agencies have given their volunteers so much training in the area of ethics of journalism; and the radio station has continued to replicate the training even when the community media funding activities slowed down between 2019 and 2021 as a result of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. He acknowledged that it was by attending most of the trainings organised, for example, by the *Centre for Media and Society* and other local NGOs, as well as European Union and the *Breakthrough Action Nigeria*, that he personally acquired some basic skills in objective journalism, educating others in objective reporting and in handling other challenges faced by their radio station.

Overcoming the confusion among participatory, narrative, advocacy and solutions journalism and creating a bridge to connect them in reportage was also highlighted as another significant strategy in repositioning journalistic objectivity vis-à-vis sustainable development in Nigeria. Such a bridge, interviewees stressed, would also provide a more appropriate strategy to the coverage of social events within local communities in Nigerian.

Participatory journalism, on the one hand, seeks to involve community members in the reporting process, thus, allowing them to share their stories and perspectives directly. This could create a sense of ownership, and perhaps, make the coverage more relevant to the needs of the community, precisely because it is based on the indigenous knowledge systems.

Solutions journalism, on the other hand, emphasises positive development and brings out solutions to local problems rather than just

reporting on issues. This approach could inspire and motivate the community to take concrete actions for change.

While narrative journalism uses storytelling techniques to report on complex issues in a relatable manner and could engage audiences emotionally and make information more accessible, advocacy journalism, in turn, focuses on issues affecting communities, highlighting injustices and advocating for change.

Interviewees reasoned that bridging the different strategies of news report could empower marginalised voices as well as foster social inclusion and social movements for change. The synergy could also help to bring about some level of tolerance and sophistication in the practice of objective journalism in Nigeria, thereby enabling a broader acceptability of the ethical principle across diverse media sectors and social contexts.

The use of collaborative reporting, whereby community media engage with experts from various fields – environmental science, sociology, economics, management studies, etc. – who could help the journalists gain better understanding of complex developmental issues, was another strategy suggested. As suggested by Ibrahim, "Journalists should be able to interact with members from other segments of society, should be able to have a comprehensive understanding of some complex issues that are related to sustainable development programming in those other disciplines" (Interview, 2024).

Respondents also pointed to the importance of impact reporting. For them, it is important for journalists to centre their reports on the real-life impact of development policies and events on individuals and local communities, rather than only on the events themselves. This kind of reporting, respondents reasoned, could help people understand the relevance of news reports to their lives.

Alongside impact reporting is the need for a clear definition of practice goals and fidelity to such goals across media houses. As noted by

respondents, this approach can also reshape the practice of journalistic objectivity. While some practitioners focus on informing the public, others prioritise mobilising action to foster community dialogue. Highlighting the complex nature of issues in the society from the point of view of the chosen role and goals of the media station, respondents reasoned, would provide a spectrum of beliefs about each media house in relation to journalistic objectivity.

Another factor indicated, was the need for fact-checking. Interviewees admitted that the establishment of robust fact-checking processes and training on how to use them could ensure accuracy and reduce the spread of misinformation and reinforce journalistic integrity.

According to Ibrahim, "If there's no fact-checking of issues that the media portray before the public, it gives room to the erosion of integrity in the practice and the promotion of armchair journalism; that is, those who do not go to the field – most of whom are not really trained – but just sit down, pick out, and publish what they see on social media." (Ibrahim, Interview, 2024). Ibrahim was of the view that armchair journalists are quacks who escalate fake news, because they work without fact-checking; thus, raising questions about the integrity of the media.

The interviewee was emphatic that, for efficiency and effectiveness to occur in objective reporting, it is important to establish robust fact-checking mechanisms across media houses, to reduce the trends in misinformation, disinformation and mal-information in the country.

There are also the issues of data transparency and development of empowering regulatory frameworks that are context-based. Respondents admitted that promoting transparency in data sourcing and methodology, on the one hand, would allow journalists to provide contexts and also verify the objectivity of their information. Where the sources remain unknown, except for security reasons, the authenticity of certain information would remain doubtful raising

questions about the objective nature of the news reports.

Developing clear regulatory frameworks that are contexts sensitive, on the other hand, would promote adherence to ethical standards as well as commitments to accountability in journalism, which in the long run, would not only maintain journalistic objectivity within the local legislative contexts, but would also protect journalists from undue political and commercial influences. Adeba of *Ubuntu Community Radio* (Ogoja), in particular, advocated for regulatory and legislative policies that could assist private stations and journalists to have the joy of better working conditions.

Empirical evidence, therefore, suggests that the adoption of these different approaches and strategies could create a more supportive environment for the achievement of journalistic objectivity, ultimately contributing to the achievement of sustainable development programming and goals in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This paper was set to examine how journalistic objectivity is practised by community broadcasting media stations in Nigeria and how their approach to objective reporting invariably impacts on sustainable development considerations. Additionally, the paper explored the kind of proposals made by community media journalists in the country for the reassessment of the objectivity question in media laws and ethics.

Respondents, in varying ways, admitted that journalistic objectivity and sustainable development within communities are inextricably bound, the understanding and articulation of which could be guided by the different philosophical frameworks – existentialism, positivism, pragmatism, etc. - that have driven development considerations over the decades. While their feelings and views on the practicability of journalistic objectivity are diverse, the practitioners generally sought for 'true objectivity'.

True objectivity seeks the integration of a number of investigating and reporting techniques or strategies that emerged over the decades from different ideological movements – objective, advocacy, solutions, collaborative and impact-based strategies – and the rooting of news reports on the resources from indigenous knowledge systems of communities.

The goal of the proposed integrative approach, of course, is to enable the empowerment of ordinary citizens to make informed decisions and offer both counselling and predictive proposals that are forward-looking to development planners and programmers, through the instrumentality of the mediated platforms of community media, as well as to enlarge the social framework for the achievement of equity and justice across communities.

While a number of constraints that impede the effective use of community media to promote 'sustainability' both in objective community broadcasting and inclusive development programming within communities have been identified, respondents also highlighted those factors that when properly appropriated, could mitigate the challenges and open up broader spaces for community media to engage more meaningfully in the promotion of sustainable development programmes within their communities.

These elements, among others, include the continuous education and training of community media volunteers for competency in sustainability; sustained funding supports for community media; fair representation of all sides in a story; and the bridging of reporting styles and techniques of journalism to achieve justice and 'true objectivity'. Others are the readiness to fact-check on issues for accuracy before reporting; ensure transparency in data and sources of information; and constitute regulatory and legislative frameworks that are context-sensitive.

In view of these findings, the following recommendations are made to better position

community media for sustainable development communication:

First, though factual reporting is essentially important for development communication, a careful balancing of the need for detached details with the life world contexts of communities in news reports would offer broader opportunities for justice and equity across communities.

Second, because of the difficulty in measuring journalistic objectivity with exactitude, other terminologies such as honesty, accuracy, and fairness that connect better with local values and norms, should substitute objectivity in national regulatory frameworks as well as development prescriptions.

Third, community media practitioners would need to urgently address, in an ongoing way, the contradictions and disagreements within their ranks on basic policy, technical and development issues, so as to have unified frameworks to handle those issues and convince other stakeholders to have deeper faith in their revisionist projects.

Finally, a new frontier in research is required to gauge the feelings of mainstream journalists and explore the impact of the objectivity question on the mainstream media practice in the country.

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