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COMPETING JOURNALISTIC ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND ETHICAL JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection between journalistic role conceptions and ethical journalism practice within the Nigerian media environment. It interrogates how competing professional roles: watchdog, guide dog, attack dog, guard dog, and lapdog journalism, shape ethical decision-making and professional identity. Drawing on normative and critical theories of journalism, the study synthesizes global and Nigerian scholarship to argue that journalism is increasingly characterized by role plurality and institutional tension. While the watchdog ideal remains central to democratic theory, empirical literature suggests that Nigerian journalism operates within a hybrid system where ownership influence, political pressure, and economic constraints shape role performance. The article concludes that ethical journalism in Nigeria is not merely a function of professional codes but a negotiated outcome of competing role expectations and structural conditions.

Keywords: Guard Dog Theory; Journalistic Roles; Lapdog Journalism; Media Ethics; Professional Identity, Watchdog Journalism

Background to the Study

Journalism occupies a strategic position in modern society as a vital institution for the dissemination of information, the facilitation of public discourse, and the promotion of democratic accountability. Across different political and cultural systems, journalists serve as intermediaries between events and the public by gathering, processing, and transmitting information that enables citizens to make informed decisions. However, the legitimacy of journalism extends beyond the mere communication of information. According to Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), journalism derives its professional identity from its commitment to values

such as truth, accuracy, fairness, independence, and public responsibility. For this reason, journalism has long been regarded as both a profession and a public trust, requiring practitioners to balance the public's right to know with broader societal interests. As societies become increasingly interconnected and mediated through digital technologies, the expectations placed on journalists have expanded, making ethical conduct an indispensable aspect of professional journalism.

The centrality of ethics to journalism stems from the fact that the profession's credibility depends largely on public confidence in the

information it provides. Ethics constitutes the moral foundation upon which journalism rests and refers to the principles, values, and standards that guide professional conduct in the gathering, processing, and dissemination of news and information. Ethical journalism seeks to ensure that information is accurate, balanced, verifiable, and presented in ways that respect human dignity and serve the public interest. Professional codes of ethics across the world emphasize values such as truthfulness, editorial independence, accountability, fairness, transparency, and social responsibility (Nigerian Press Council, 2025). These principles are not merely procedural guidelines; they are essential for maintaining public trust in media institutions and safeguarding journalism's credibility. Indeed, ethical journalism serves as the mechanism through which the profession legitimizes its social authority and distinguishes itself from propaganda, misinformation, and other forms of mediated communication (Nigerian Press Council, 2025).

While ethical principles provide the normative framework for journalism, the manner in which journalists interpret and apply these principles is often influenced by their understanding of their professional roles. Journalism scholars have increasingly argued that journalists do not operate according to a single professional identity; rather, they enact multiple and sometimes competing roles depending on institutional, political, economic, and cultural contexts (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). These role conceptions shape how journalists perceive their responsibilities to society and influence their decisions regarding news selection, sourcing, framing, and interpretation. Among the most widely discussed role conceptions are the watchdog role, which emphasizes scrutiny of those in power; the guard dog role, which seeks to protect dominant institutions and interests; the lapdog role, characterized by excessive deference to political or economic elites; the attack dog role, which actively challenges perceived opponents; and the guide dog role, which focuses on educating and directing public understanding of social issues (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). Together, these roles reflect different understandings of journalism's place and function within society.

The existence of these diverse role conceptions has attracted considerable scholarly attention because journalistic roles are closely linked to professional behaviour and ethical decision-making. Rather than being fixed or universally accepted, journalistic roles are socially negotiated and continually redefined through interactions among journalists, media organizations, audiences, governments, and other stakeholders (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Consequently, journalists often find themselves navigating tensions between professional ideals and practical realities. For example, a journalist operating within the watchdog tradition may prioritize investigative reporting and accountability, whereas one functioning within a guard dog or lapdog orientation may place greater emphasis on institutional loyalty, stability, or partisan interests. As Hanitzsch (2023) observes, these differing orientations influence how journalists interpret ethical obligations such as objectivity, fairness, independence, and responsibility. Thus, understanding journalistic role conceptions is essential for understanding variations in ethical practice across media environments.

The relationship between journalistic roles and ethical practice becomes even more significant when examined within specific national contexts. In Nigeria, journalism has evolved through colonial, nationalist, military, and democratic phases, each of which has contributed to shaping the profession's ethical culture

and role orientations. Historically, Nigerian journalism has been recognized for its contributions to political freedom, national development, and democratic accountability. At the same time, the profession has operated within a media environment characterised by political influence, ownership pressures, commercialisation, regulatory interventions, and rapid technological change. In response to these challenges, the Nigerian media industry has developed ethical frameworks that emphasize editorial independence, accuracy, fairness, accountability, respect for privacy, social responsibility, and commitment to the public interest. These ethical standards are further reinforced through institutional mechanisms designed to promote professionalism and sustain public confidence in the media (Nigerian Press Council, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, the influence of political interests, media ownership patterns, commercialisation, digital media pressures, and audience competition has created a complex environment in which journalists now adopt varying professional orientations that potentially shape their ethical decisions and practices. While ethical journalism remains a widely accepted professional ideal, there is ongoing debate regarding how these role conceptions influence journalists' commitment to ethical standards and whether certain roles strengthen or undermine ethical practice. Despite growing scholarly attention to journalistic roles globally, limited conceptual attention has been devoted to understanding the ethical implications of these role orientations within the Nigerian media landscape. This gap necessitates a critical examination of the relationship between journalistic role conceptions and ethical journalism practice in Nigeria.

Aim and Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically examine the relationship between journalistic role conceptions and ethical journalism practice in Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

1. To examine the major journalistic role conceptions prevalent in contemporary Nigerian journalism.
2. To analyze the ethical implications of watchdog, guide dog, attack dog, guard dog, and lapdog role orientations in journalism practice.
3. To evaluate how competing journalistic role conceptions influence adherence to ethical standards in the Nigerian media environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalistic Role Conception

Journalistic role conception has become one of the most theoretically productive frameworks in contemporary journalism studies because it explains how journalists construct meaning around their professional identity. At its most basic level, it refers to "discursive constructions of journalism's institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding its position in society" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 123). This means journalism is not merely a technical occupation but a socially negotiated institution whose meaning is constantly shaped by interaction between journalists, audiences, and power structures. Deuze (2005) earlier captured this ideological dimension of journalism when he identified autonomy, objectivity, immediacy, and public service as core professional

values, arguing that these values function as “occupational ideology” guiding journalistic practice. However, later scholarship has demonstrated that these ideals are not universally stable but are interpreted differently across contexts (Zelizer, 2017; Reese, 2001).

Building on this, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, p. 129) further argue that journalistic roles are subject to “continuous discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation.” This suggests that journalism is not a fixed institution but a dynamic field of meaning-making. Mellado (2015) similarly emphasizes that journalistic roles are expressed both in “role orientations” and “role performance,” meaning that what journalists believe they should do often differs from what they actually do in practice. This tension has been widely confirmed in comparative studies such as the Worlds of Journalism Study, which reveals significant cross-national variation in how journalists prioritize roles such as watchdog, disseminator, or civic educator (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver & Willnat, 2012).

Critical scholarship has further problematised the instability of role conception in the digital age. Carlson (2016) argues that journalism today is marked by “boundary struggles” as non-traditional actors such as bloggers, influencers, and algorithmic platforms contest journalistic authority. Waisbord (2013) adds that fragmentation of journalism undermines professional coherence, especially when journalists adopt conflicting role expectations. Similarly, Vos and Hanusch (2018) argue that journalistic roles now extend beyond political life into everyday life, identity construction, and emotional engagement. This expansion complicates ethical clarity, making role conception not just an analytical category but a site of professional crisis and negotiation.

Competing Journalistic Roles

The literature on journalistic roles increasingly emphasizes their competing and overlapping nature rather than their singular existence. The watchdog role remains the dominant normative ideal in democratic theory. It conceptualizes journalists as independent monitors of power tasked with exposing corruption and holding institutions accountable (Norris, 2014; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). As Bennett and Serrin explain, watchdog journalism involves “independent scrutiny of the activities of government and other powerful actors” (2005, p. 396), ensuring that citizens are adequately informed. Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach (2017) further argue that watchdog journalism is central to democratic legitimacy, although its actual performance often diverges from its normative expectations.

However, competing roles challenge the dominance of the watchdog model. The guide dog role, developed in interpretive journalism scholarship, emphasizes explanation, contextualization, and civic education rather than confrontation (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997; Ettema & Glasser, 1998). The attack dog role, by contrast, represents adversarial journalism that is often politically motivated and emotionally charged, sometimes undermining neutrality (Mazzoleni, 2014). Reich (2011) introduces the guard dog concept, arguing that journalists frequently protect elite interests by selectively reporting issues that align with institutional power structures. In contrast, the lapdog role describes journalism that becomes excessively submissive to political or economic elites, reproducing official narratives without scrutiny (Voltmer, 2013).

These competing roles coexist in tension rather than in isolation. Hallin and Mancini (2004) demonstrate that media systems vary in how these roles are prioritized depending on political and

economic structures. Chadwick (2017) further argues that the “hybrid media system” intensifies role competition by blending traditional journalism with digital platforms that reward speed and virality over verification. Couldry (2012) adds that power in contemporary media is distributed across institutions, algorithms, and audiences, creating unstable role expectations. Consequently, journalists often shift between watchdog, guide dog, attack dog, guard dog, and lapdog orientations depending on institutional pressures, ownership influence, and audience demands.

Ethical Journalism Practice in Nigeria

Ethical journalism in Nigeria is formally guided by the Nigerian Press Council Code of Ethics, which emphasizes truth, accuracy, fairness, independence, and accountability (Nigerian Press Council, 2015). These principles align with global normative standards articulated by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), who argue that journalism’s primary obligation is to “provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (p. 12). Ward (2018) similarly maintains that ethical journalism requires fidelity to citizens rather than to advertisers or political actors. In principle, therefore, Nigerian journalism aspires to universal ethical standards grounded in democratic accountability and public service.

However, empirical literature reveals persistent structural and institutional constraints on ethical journalism in Nigeria. Oso, Adu-Kumi, and Adeyemi (2019) argue that economic precarity and ownership concentration significantly undermine ethical compliance. Ekeanyanwu (2015) highlights the influence of political elites on editorial decisions, while Akinfeleye (2003) describes Nigerian journalism as oscillating between being a “fourth estate” and a compromised institution shaped by external pressures. Skjerdal (2011) adds that African journalism ethics must be understood within socio-economic constraints, where survival often competes with professional ideals. These conditions contribute to practices such as sensationalism, bias, and transactional journalism, which weaken public trust.

Recent scholarship further demonstrates that digital transformation has introduced new ethical complexities. Salawu (2020) notes that online journalism has intensified misinformation and reduced verification standards. Eze (2022) argues that algorithm-driven visibility and audience metrics increasingly shape editorial decisions in ways that challenge traditional ethical norms. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) also highlight legal and regulatory pressures that constrain press freedom in Nigeria. In addition, De Beer and Merrill (2009) argue that journalism ethics is always contextual and negotiated rather than absolute, meaning Nigerian ethical journalism must be understood as a field of continuous struggle between professional ideals, structural limitations, and technological disruption.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Role Theory as advanced by Biddle (1986) and subsequently adapted within journalism studies by Hanitzsch and Vos (2017). Role Theory posits that individuals perform specific roles based on socially constructed expectations, norms, and responsibilities associated with their positions within society. In journalism, role theory explains how journalists develop perceptions of their professional responsibilities and how these perceptions influence their behaviour, decision-making processes, and interactions with society. The theory is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for understanding the emergence of diverse journalistic role conceptions such as the

watchdog, guide dog, attack dog, guard dog, and lapdog roles. It further explains how these role orientations shape journalists' interpretations of ethical obligations, including objectivity, fairness, accountability, and independence. Role Theory offers a useful lens for examining the relationship between journalistic role conceptions and ethical journalism practice in Nigeria, by emphasizing the connection between professional identity and professional conduct,

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative conceptual synthesis approach. It relies on systematic analysis of scholarly literature, theoretical works, empirical studies, and policy documents on journalism ethics and journalistic role performance. Key sources include global journalism theory (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Mellado, 2015), comparative media systems theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and African media studies (Skjerdal, 2011; Oso, Adu-Kumi, & Adeyemi, 2019). The analytical framework was guided by Role Theory (Biddle, 1986), which explains how professional behavior is shaped by socially constructed expectations. This framework was used to interpret how journalists navigate competing role identities within structurally constrained environments such as Nigeria.

Analysis and Discussion

The theoretical landscape of communication sociology is structurally mapped by distinct canine metaphors that define the press's fluctuating relationship to power, publics and profit, namely Watchdog journalism (1956), Lapdog journalism (2004), Guard Dog journalism (1995), Attack Dog journalism (2014), Guide Dog journalism (1997), Sheep Dog journalism (2022), Lap Guard Hybrid journalism (2017), Civic Dog journalism (1999), Spy Dog journalism (1998), Companion Dog journalism (2020), Stray Dog journalism (2013), and Platform Dog journalism (2017). These coinages represent precise epistemological diagnoses of a profession perpetually warring for its own ethical autonomy. The classical libertarian typologies established by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) positioned the Watchdog as the ultimate independent guardian of democracy, a conceptualization later reinforced by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) and Norris (2014) as an autonomous entity whose fundamental civic duty is to expose institutional malfeasance regardless of who occupies the centers of power. However, as Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach (2017) argue, the actual performance of these roles within any given society routinely diverges from these normative expectations. Rather than existing in clean isolation, these role conceptions conflict and overlap inside the same public square, creating a fractured media ecosystem where different societal factions demand entirely contradictory journalistic behaviors simultaneously.

This institutional descent from public guardian to elite accomplice is explicitly captured by the coinages of Lapdog journalism, Guard Dog journalism, and the Lap Guard Hybrid configuration, which expose the systemic vulnerabilities of media cooptation. As articulated by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Voltmer (2013), the Lapdog role manifests when media systems become entirely submissive to political and economic elites, uncritically reproducing official narratives while suppressing dissent. This structural compliance is further nuanced by Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1995) through the Guard Dog model, which demonstrates that the press often performs selective scrutiny,

acting as a defensive apparatus for dominant social groups rather than the broader populace. To reconcile the erratic switching between autonomy and compliance in modern multivariable political spheres, Reich (2011) and Chadwick (2017) introduced the Lap Guard Hybrid concept, illustrating how journalists oscillate between independence and elite dependence. When ideological polarization intensifies, this institutional compliance can transform into Attack Dog journalism, identified by Tanner (2012) and Mazzoleni (2014) as an aggressive, hyper adversarial posture driven by partisan conflict. Under the strain of national crises, the press alters its behavior further to become the Sheep Dog, a term arising from security framing literature to describe how media herds public opinion toward state sanctioned security narratives. The ethical implications of these transformations are severe, as they trade public illumination for the preservation of elite authority or weaponized conflict.

In direct philosophical opposition to these domesticated and weaponized pathologies, alternative role conceptions have emerged to salvage the interpretative and deliberative responsibilities of the press. The Guide Dog model advanced by Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) arose from the historical shift toward analytical reporting, prioritizing contextual analysis and education to help citizens navigate complex social realities. This interpretative impulse aligns closely with the tenets of Civic Dog journalism, championed by Glasser (1999) and Rosen (1999) during the public journalism movement, which rejects passive objectivity in favour of actively fostering direct democratic participation and public deliberation. Furthermore, when the investigative function is pushed to its logical extreme, the press operates through the modality of Spy Dog journalism, which Ettema and Glasser (1998) characterize as a form of surveillance intelligence dedicated to uncovering deeply hidden institutional wrongdoings. Ethically, these roles attempt to reanchor the fountainhead of journalism within an active, morally conscious relationship with the citizenry, transforming the journalist from a passive recorder into an active agent of democratic enlightenment.

Within compromised media ecologies, overtly ethical journalists who attempt to execute a pure watchdog or investigative mandate are frequently labeled negatively as "destabilizing agents," facing professional isolation, structural marginalization, and severe safety hazards. Conversely, "lapdog idealists" who embrace compliance, engage in "praise-singing," or practice Cameroonian "Alleluia journalism" are normalized as the ideal standard because their cooperative stance aligns with the financial and political objectives of media owners and state elites. This inversion of professional standards is structurally sustained by "soft coercion," where independent reporting is starved of advertising revenue, forcing journalists to view compliance as a pragmatic necessity for career survival rather than an ethical failure.

If one steps back from taxonomy into philosophy, what emerges is not a zoology of journalism but a metaphysics of power. These canine metaphors are not innocent descriptors; they are ethical diagnostics. They reveal that journalism is never merely about information but about allegiance, never merely about reporting but about positioning. The guard dog theory, in particular, overturns the moral comfort of the watchdog ideal by exposing journalism's structural embeddedness within elite networks of dependency. Hallin and Mancini's comparative media systems reinforce this insight by showing that press behaviour varies not simply according to professional norms but according to political

economy, legal frameworks, and institutional histories. In such a world, ethics cannot be reduced to individual virtue; it becomes a structural negotiation, a continuous struggle between autonomy and capture, between public duty and institutional survival.

Thus, the implications for ethical journalism are as severe as they are unavoidable. If journalism can shift between watchdog vigilance, lapdog submission, guard dog selectivity, and attack dog aggression depending on context, then ethical consistency becomes fragile, even provisional. Ethics no longer resides solely in codes but in conditions; not only in journalists' conscience but in ownership structures, regulatory environments, and economic pressures. The coinage of these "dogs" therefore represents more than academic creativity. It is an intellectual confession that journalism is a field of moral instability. To name these dogs is to admit that journalism is perpetually negotiating its own legitimacy, forever torn between speaking truth to power and surviving within power's architecture.

This systemic degradation of professional standards is epitomized by the widespread institutionalization of "brown envelope journalism" (BEJ), which directly mirrors the deeply entrenched corruption observed in other vital societal pillars like the Nigerian judiciary. In countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, chronic salary delays and abysmal wages force journalists to normalize bribes variously termed "kola," "chope," or "soli", as a standard transaction to guarantee positive coverage or suppress critical investigations, causing an overnight accumulation of illicit wealth among corrupt practitioners. In the media, intense in-group pressures and informal social expectations demand that elevated professionals conspicuously display material wealth as a marker of career success, while honest practitioners who refuse political inducements are systematically denied promotions and socially punished for their integrity. Consequently, the gap between a positive ethical mindset and unethical practice is bridged by systemic survival strategies, entrenching a culture of compliance that transforms the constitutional watchdog into a well-compensated lapdog.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the intersection between journalistic role conceptions, competing journalistic roles, and ethical journalism practice, with particular reference to the Nigerian media environment. The central insight emerging from the synthesis of literature is that journalism is not a monolithic profession guided by a single normative identity, but a structurally plural and ideologically contested field. Journalistic role conception literature demonstrates that journalists operate within "discursive constructions of journalism's institutional identity" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 117), meaning that what journalism is and ought to be is continuously negotiated within professional and societal spaces. Consequently, journalism becomes a site of interpretive struggle in which different actors define its purpose in divergent and sometimes contradictory ways.

The analysis of competing journalistic roles further reinforces this complexity by showing that journalism simultaneously performs watchdog, guide dog, attack dog, guard dog, and lapdog functions depending on contextual pressures. While watchdog journalism remains the dominant democratic ideal (Norris, 2014), the literature shows that real-world journalism often diverges from this

normative expectation due to structural constraints and institutional dependencies. Reich (2011) demonstrates that journalism can function as a "guard dog" by protecting elite interests, while Voltmer (2013) highlights its tendency to oscillate between independence and dependence in transitional democracies. In Nigeria, these tensions are intensified by political influence, ownership structures, and economic pressures that shape editorial decision-making and role performance.

Ethical journalism practice in Nigeria emerges from this analysis as a contested and unstable outcome rather than a fixed professional achievement. Although the Nigerian Press Council Code of Ethics provides a clear normative framework emphasizing truth, fairness, independence, and accountability (Nigerian Press Council, 2015), actual practice is frequently constrained by structural realities. Oso, Adu-Kumi, and Adeyemi (2019) argue that economic vulnerability and institutional pressures significantly weaken ethical compliance, while Skjerdal (2011, p. 65) emphasizes that African journalism ethics must be understood within socio-economic conditions that shape professional behaviour. The digital transformation of media has further complicated ethical practice by introducing issues of misinformation, speed-driven reporting, and algorithmic influence. Thus, ethical journalism in Nigeria is best understood as a negotiated process shaped by the continuous interaction between professional ideals and contextual constraints.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen ethical journalism practice in Nigeria amid competing journalistic role expectations.

First, there is a need for continuous professional retraining and ethical reorientation of journalists within media organizations. Journalism training institutions, professional bodies, and regulatory agencies should intensify capacity-building programmes that emphasize ethical decision-making in environments characterized by role conflict. Such training should go beyond theoretical ethics to include practical simulations of real-world dilemmas arising from watchdog, attack dog, guard dog, and lapdog pressures. This will enable journalists to better navigate competing expectations without compromising professional integrity.

Second, media ownership structures should be re-examined to enhance editorial independence. The literature consistently shows that ownership influence is one of the strongest determinants of ethical compromise in journalism. Therefore, policy interventions that promote transparency in media ownership and reduce undue political or commercial interference are essential. Strengthening institutional safeguards that protect editorial autonomy will help reinforce the watchdog function of journalism while limiting tendencies toward lapdog or guard dog orientations.

Third, regulatory and professional bodies such as the Nigerian Press Council and the Nigerian Union of Journalists should strengthen enforcement mechanisms of existing ethical codes. While ethical frameworks already exist, their implementation remains inconsistent. A more proactive monitoring system that encourages compliance through both sanctions and incentives would help institutionalize ethical standards more effectively. At the same time, these bodies should adopt a supportive rather than purely punitive approach, focusing on mentorship, dialogue, and professional development.

Fourth, media organizations should develop internal editorial policies that clearly define acceptable role boundaries within news production. Given the coexistence of multiple journalistic roles, clarity in newsroom culture is essential to prevent ethical ambiguity. Editorial guidelines should explicitly prioritize public interest journalism and establish safeguards against undue partisan influence, sensationalism, or commercial distortion of news content.

Finally, journalists themselves must embrace a stronger culture of reflective professionalism. Ethical journalism cannot be sustained solely through institutional regulation; it also depends on individual moral responsibility. Journalists must continuously interrogate their own role orientations and remain conscious of how their professional choices impact democratic accountability. Strengthening personal commitment to truth, fairness, and independence remains central to resolving the tensions generated by competing journalistic roles.

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