ETHICS OF DATA PRIVACY IN JOURNALISM A STUDY ON CONSUMER CONSENT AND DATA USAGE IN DIGITAL NEWS PLATFORM

BY

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project has been read and met the requirement for the Award of National Diploma (ND) in the Department of Mass Communication, Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin.

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DEDICATION

This project work is dedicated to Almighty God and my parents for their unwavering support and encouragement through my studies and may God almighty bless the work of their hands.

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I like to extend my sincere gratitude to my parent for their invaluable support and guidance throughout this project. Their expertise and encouragement were instrumental in shaping this work. I also appreciate my supervisor, Mr Olufadi, for her assistance and support throughout the project work.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The rapid growth of digital journalism has revolutionized the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Unlike traditional media, digital news platforms leverage vast amounts of data to personalize content, track user engagement, and optimize revenue streams. While these technological advancements have improved accessibility and efficiency in news reporting, they have also raised significant ethical concerns regarding data privacy. Consumers often engage with digital news platforms without fully understanding how their personal data is collected, stored, and utilized. This has led to growing concerns about privacy violations, lack of transparency, and potential misuse of consumer information by media organizations.

One of the fundamental ethical concerns in digital journalism is the issue of consumer consent. Many news platforms collect user data through cookies, subscriptions, and targeted advertisements, often without explicit or fully informed consent. While some platforms provide privacy policies and consent agreements, these documents are often lengthy, complex, and filled with legal jargon that the average consumer may not fully comprehend. Consequently, users may unknowingly agree to data collection practices that compromise their privacy. This raises questions about whether digital news organizations are upholding ethical standards in their data usage policies and whether existing privacy laws adequately protect consumer rights in the digital media space.

Moreover, the ethical implications of data privacy in journalism extend beyond individual consumer rights to broader issues of media trust and credibility. In an era where misinformation and data breaches are prevalent, public skepticism toward news organizations continues to rise. If media outlets fail to prioritize ethical data handling, they risk eroding audience trust, which is fundamental to journalistic integrity. Additionally, as regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) impose stricter guidelines on data privacy, news platforms must navigate the challenge of balancing business interests with ethical and legal obligations.

This study seeks to examine the ethics of data privacy in journalism, focusing on consumer consent and data usage in digital news platforms. It will explore whether consumers are adequately informed about how their data is collected and utilized, assess the transparency of digital news platforms regarding privacy policies, and evaluate whether these practices align with ethical journalism standards. By addressing these concerns, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on media ethics and propose

recommendations for enhancing consumer data protection in the digital journalism landscape.

The rise of digital journalism has transformed the traditional media landscape, making news more accessible, interactive, and personalized. Digital news platforms utilize sophisticated technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and algorithm-driven content recommendations to enhance user experience and engagement. These platforms collect vast amounts of consumer data, including browsing history, reading habits, geographic locations, and even personal preferences, to tailor content and advertisements to individual users. While these advancements have improved news consumption by offering personalized experiences, they have also sparked concerns regarding privacy, ethical data usage, and consumer consent. Many users remain unaware of the extent to which their data is being collected and how it is being used by media organizations. This lack of awareness raises ethical questions about whether consumers are truly in control of their personal information when engaging with digital journalism.

A major ethical dilemma in digital journalism revolves around consumer consent. Traditionally, ethical journalism has emphasized transparency, accuracy, and accountability. However, in the digital space, these values are often challenged by complex data collection mechanisms that prioritize business interests over user privacy. Many digital news platforms require users to accept cookie policies or sign up for newsletters without clearly explaining the implications of these agreements. Privacy policies, when provided, are often lengthy, filled with technical and legal jargon, and difficult for the average reader to comprehend. As a result, users may unknowingly consent to data collection practices that expose them to risks such as targeted advertising, data profiling, and potential breaches of sensitive information. This raises important ethical and legal questions about whether these platforms are adhering to global data protection standards and respecting consumer rights.

Beyond individual privacy concerns, the ethical implications of data collection in journalism also impact public trust in the media. In an era where misinformation, fake news, and data breaches are prevalent, many consumers are increasingly skeptical about how media organizations handle their personal information. Unethical data practices can damage the credibility of digital news platforms and erode the trust that is fundamental to journalism. When audiences feel that news organizations prioritize commercial interests over ethical responsibilities, they may disengage from news consumption altogether, leading to a decline in public trust in the media. This is particularly concerning in democratic societies, where access to reliable and ethically produced news is essential for informed decision-making.

Moreover, regulatory frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States have been introduced to enforce stricter data privacy guidelines. These regulations aim to ensure that digital platforms obtain explicit user consent before collecting data, provide clear privacy policies, and offer users the right to control how their information is used. However, compliance with these regulations varies across different news organizations, and many platforms still struggle to implement transparent and ethical data management practices. Additionally, in countries with weaker data protection laws, consumers may be even more vulnerable to data exploitation. This calls for a deeper examination of how digital news platforms navigate the balance between ethical journalism and data-driven business models.

This study seeks to investigate the ethics of data privacy in journalism, with a particular focus on consumer consent and data usage in digital news platforms. It aims to assess whether consumers are adequately informed about how their data is collected, examine the transparency of digital news platforms regarding their privacy policies, and evaluate whether these practices align with ethical journalism standards. By addressing these issues, this research will contribute to the growing discourse on digital media ethics and propose recommendations for enhancing consumer data protection. Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights that will help journalists, media organizations, and policymakers develop more ethical and transparent approaches to handling consumer data in the digital news ecosystem.

The transition from traditional print and broadcast journalism to digital news platforms has fundamentally changed the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Digital journalism relies heavily on data collection technologies to enhance user engagement, personalize content, and optimize advertising revenue (Newman, 2022). Unlike conventional media, where editorial decisions were based primarily on journalistic instincts and audience research, digital platforms use algorithm-driven models to analyze consumer behavior and deliver targeted news feeds. While this has led to more efficient content dissemination, it has also introduced significant ethical concerns regarding data privacy, consumer consent, and the security of personal information (Zuboff, 2019).

One of the key ethical challenges in digital journalism is the issue of consumer consent. Many digital news platforms collect personal data through cookies, subscription services, and third-party tracking tools, often without obtaining explicit consent from users (Solove, 2020). While privacy policies and terms of service agreements are provided, they are frequently written in complex legal language that makes it difficult for consumers to fully understand the extent of data collection (Turow et al., 2015). Research has shown that

most users do not read privacy policies before accepting them, raising concerns about whether true informed consent is being obtained (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020). This lack of transparency and user awareness creates an ethical dilemma, as consumers may be unknowingly agreeing to data collection practices that expose them to potential privacy violations, surveillance, and exploitation by both media organizations and advertisers.

Moreover, data privacy issues in digital journalism extend beyond individual rights to broader societal implications. When media organizations prioritize data monetization over ethical journalism practices, they risk undermining public trust in the news industry (Andrejevic, 2021). Research suggests that consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical about how their personal information is being used, particularly in light of high-profile data breaches and privacy scandals involving major technology and media companies (Napoli, 2019). This erosion of trust can have serious consequences, as it may discourage people from engaging with digital news platforms or push them toward alternative sources that may not adhere to journalistic integrity. Additionally, the use of data-driven algorithms to shape news consumption has been criticized for reinforcing echo chambers and filter bubbles, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and potentially exacerbating misinformation (Pariser, 2011).

The legal and regulatory landscape surrounding data privacy in journalism has evolved in response to these concerns. In regions such as the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has established strict guidelines on data collection, mandating that digital platforms obtain explicit user consent before processing personal information (European Commission, 2018). Similarly, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States grants consumers the right to access, delete, and opt out of data sharing practices (California Department of Justice, 2020). While these regulations have introduced greater accountability, compliance among digital news platforms remains inconsistent, and enforcement mechanisms vary across jurisdictions (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2022). Furthermore, in countries with weaker legal protections, consumers are more vulnerable to data exploitation, highlighting the need for stronger global standards on ethical data practices in journalism.

Given these ethical and legal challenges, this study seeks to examine the intersection of data privacy and journalism, with a particular focus on consumer consent and data usage in digital news platforms. It aims to assess whether consumers are adequately informed about how their data is collected, evaluate the transparency of privacy policies in news media, and determine whether current practices align with ethical journalism principles. By exploring these issues, this research will contribute to the broader discourse on digital media ethics and offer recommendations for enhancing consumer data

protection. Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights that will guide journalists, media organizations, and policymakers in developing more ethical and transparent approaches to handling consumer data in the digital news ecosystem.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The rapid digitalization of journalism has introduced significant ethical challenges, particularly in the area of data privacy. Digital news platforms collect vast amounts of consumer data, including browsing behavior, location tracking, and reading preferences, to tailor news content and optimize advertising revenue (Newman, 2022). While this data-driven approach has improved the user experience, it has also raised serious concerns about privacy violations, lack of transparency, and the extent to which users are aware of and consent to such data collection. Many users interact with news websites and mobile applications without fully understanding how their personal data is gathered, stored, and utilized by media organizations (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020). This raises an ethical dilemma: are digital news platforms respecting consumer privacy, or are they prioritizing business interests over ethical journalism?

A major problem is the issue of consumer consent. Ethical journalism requires transparency and accountability, yet many digital news platforms fail to provide clear and accessible information regarding their data collection practices. Studies have shown that privacy policies and terms of service agreements are often long, complex, and filled with legal jargon that most users do not read or comprehend before accepting (Solove, 2020). As a result, consumers may unknowingly agree to invasive data collection practices, leaving them vulnerable to data exploitation, targeted advertising, and even third-party surveillance (Turow et al., 2015). The lack of informed consent challenges the fundamental ethical principles of journalism, which emphasize public trust, accountability, and respect for individual rights (Andrejevic, 2021).

Furthermore, the ethical concerns surrounding data privacy in journalism extend beyond individual user rights to broader issues of media credibility and public trust. Recent research indicates that consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of news organizations due to concerns over data security and privacy breaches (Napoli, 2019). High-profile data leaks and scandals, such as those involving major tech companies and media platforms, have contributed to growing public distrust in digital news sources (Zuboff, 2019). If news organizations continue to engage in opaque data collection practices without addressing ethical concerns, they risk alienating their audiences and further eroding public confidence in journalism. This is particularly problematic in democratic societies, where a free and independent press is essential for informed decision-making and civic engagement (Pariser, 2011).

Despite the implementation of data privacy regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States, compliance among digital news platforms remains inconsistent (European Commission, 2018; California Department of Justice, 2020). Some media organizations have taken steps to enhance transparency and user control over personal data, but many still rely on aggressive data collection strategies that prioritize advertising revenue over ethical considerations (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2022). In countries with weaker data protection laws, consumers face even greater risks, as regulatory oversight is often insufficient to hold media organizations accountable for unethical data practices.

Given these challenges, this study seeks to address the ethical issues surrounding data privacy in journalism by examining the extent to which digital news platforms uphold consumer consent and responsible data usage. The study will investigate whether consumers are adequately informed about how their data is collected and utilized, assess the transparency of privacy policies, and determine whether current data practices align with ethical journalism standards. By exploring these issues, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on media ethics and propose recommendations for improving data privacy practices in digital journalism. Ultimately, this study will provide valuable insights for media professionals, policymakers, and consumers, ensuring that ethical considerations remain at the forefront of digital news practices.

1.3   Objectives of the Study:

1. To analyze ethical concerns related to data privacy in journalism
2. To evaluate consumer consent mechanisms in digital news platforms
3. To assess how data is used and whether it aligns with ethical journalism standards

1.4   Research Questions:

1. What are the ethical implications of data collection by digital news platforms?
2. How transparent are digital news platforms in obtaining user consent?
3. Are consumers aware of how their data is used?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The increasing integration of digital technologies in journalism has transformed the media landscape, raising critical ethical concerns about data privacy, consumer consent, and the responsible use of personal information. This study is significant because it addresses the ethical implications of data collection by digital news platforms, an issue that directly impacts media organizations, policymakers, and consumers (Newman, 2022). In an era where digital journalism relies on algorithmic personalization and targeted advertising, understanding the extent to which news organizations uphold ethical standards

in data privacy is crucial (Zuboff, 2019). By examining these issues, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that will inform best practices in ethical journalism and data protection.

One of the key contributions of this study is its potential to enhance consumer awareness and protection. Research has shown that many digital news consumers are unaware of how their personal data is collected, stored, and shared with third parties (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020). Many users blindly accept privacy policies without fully understanding their implications, often due to the complex and technical language used in these agreements (Solove, 2020). This lack of awareness leaves consumers vulnerable to potential privacy violations, data exploitation, and targeted misinformation. By investigating how digital news platforms inform users about their data practices, this study can help bridge the knowledge gap and empower consumers to make more informed decisions regarding their online privacy.

Furthermore, this study is significant in its contribution to media ethics and journalistic accountability. Ethical journalism is built on principles of transparency, trust, and public interest, yet the growing commercialization of digital news platforms has led to practices that may compromise these values (Andrejevic, 2021). Many news organizations prioritize revenue generation through data monetization, often at the expense of consumer rights (Turow et al., 2015). This study will provide empirical evidence on whether digital news platforms align with ethical journalism standards regarding data privacy. By shedding light on these practices, the study can encourage media organizations to adopt more responsible and transparent data policies, ultimately strengthening trust between journalists and their audiences.

Policymakers and regulatory bodies will also benefit from the findings of this research. Although data protection laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States have established guidelines for data privacy, enforcement remains a challenge (European Commission, 2018; California Department of Justice, 2020). Many digital news platforms operate in jurisdictions with weaker legal protections, leaving consumers exposed to unethical data practices. This study will provide insights into how well digital news platforms comply with existing regulations and whether there is a need for stricter enforcement or new legislative measures. By informing policymakers, the study can contribute to the development of stronger data privacy frameworks that protect consumer rights in the digital news ecosystem.

Additionally, this study holds significance for journalism scholars and media researchers. As digital journalism continues to evolve, there is a growing need for academic

research that critically examines the ethical implications of emerging technologies in media (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2022). This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive analysis of data privacy practices in digital journalism, with a specific focus on consumer consent and ethical data usage. Future research can build on these findings to explore related issues such as algorithmic bias, misinformation, and media sustainability in the digital age.

This study is significant because it addresses a pressing ethical challenge in modern journalism: the balance between data-driven innovation and consumer privacy rights. By examining the transparency of digital news platforms, the effectiveness of privacy policies, and the alignment of current practices with ethical journalism standards, this research will provide practical recommendations for consumers, journalists, media organizations, and policymakers. Ultimately, the study aims to foster a more ethical and responsible digital media environment, ensuring that consumer data is handled with integrity and respect in the rapidly evolving world of digital journalism.

1.6   Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the ethical concerns surrounding data privacy in journalism, specifically examining consumer consent and data usage practices in digital news platforms. The study aims to assess the extent to which digital news organizations inform users about their data collection methods, whether consumers fully understand and agree to these terms, and how such data is utilized by media companies. By analyzing these factors, the research seeks to determine whether current industry practices align with ethical journalism standards, such as transparency, accountability, and respect for consumer rights (Napoli, 2019).

Geographically, the study will concentrate on digital news platforms operating within a specific jurisdiction, potentially covering both local and international media outlets. The study may include media organizations that function under data protection laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States, and other relevant privacy frameworks in different regions (European Commission, 2018; California Department of Justice, 2020). This comparative approach will provide insights into how regulatory environments influence the data privacy practices of digital journalism platforms and highlight discrepancies in consumer protection across different jurisdictions.

The study will also focus on both mainstream and independent digital news platforms, as their approaches to data collection and privacy policies may differ significantly. Mainstream news organizations, such as those affiliated with legacy media companies, often have more sophisticated data collection mechanisms due to their financial

backing and technological capabilities (Newman, 2022). On the other hand, independent digital news platforms may operate with fewer resources but could either adopt ethical data privacy practices or engage in similar data monetization strategies. By analyzing both categories, this study will offer a holistic understanding of the ethical landscape of digital journalism.

Methodologically, the study will employ a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. It will involve content analysis of privacy policies and terms of service agreements from selected digital news platforms to determine the clarity, accessibility, and comprehensibility of these documents (Solove, 2020). Additionally, surveys and interviews with digital news consumers will be conducted to assess their awareness and perceptions regarding data privacy practices in journalism (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020). The study may also include expert interviews with media professionals, data privacy advocates, and policymakers to gain further insights into industry practices and regulatory challenges.

Temporally, the research will focus on contemporary data privacy issues in digital journalism, covering recent trends and developments from the past five to ten years. This timeframe is relevant because of the increasing reliance on algorithmic personalization, artificial intelligence (AI), and targeted advertising in journalism, which have significantly impacted data privacy concerns (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2022). Additionally, high-profile data breaches and privacy scandals involving media and tech companies in recent years make it crucial to investigate whether digital news platforms have improved their data privacy practices in response to regulatory pressures and public scrutiny (Zuboff, 2019).

While the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis, it will have certain limitations. First, given the vast number of digital news platforms worldwide, the research will focus on a select number of case studies, which may not fully represent the entire industry. Second, while surveys and interviews will offer valuable insights, they will rely on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or misinterpretation of privacy policies. Finally, the study will primarily focus on ethical considerations rather than technical aspects of data security, such as encryption and cybersecurity measures, though these factors will be acknowledged where relevant.

This study will critically examine the ethical dimensions of data privacy in digital journalism by analyzing consumer consent and data usage on news platforms. It will provide insights into how media organizations handle user data, whether they comply with ethical and regulatory standards, and how consumers perceive these practices. By focusing on digital journalism in a contemporary context, the study will contribute to ongoing

discussions on media ethics, privacy rights, and responsible data governance in the digital age.

1.7 Definition of Terms

Data Privacy – Data privacy refers to the ethical and legal principles governing how personal information is collected, stored, shared, and used by organizations. It involves ensuring that individuals have control over their personal data and that their information is protected from unauthorized access or misuse (Solove, 2020).

Consumer Consent – Consumer consent is the explicit or implied permission given by individuals for organizations to collect and process their personal data. It is a fundamental aspect of data privacy laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), which require organizations to obtain informed consent before handling user data (European Commission, 2018).

Digital News Platforms – These are online platforms that provide news content through websites, mobile applications, or social media channels. Examples include news websites like BBC News, CNN, and The New York Times, as well as digital-only media organizations such as BuzzFeed and The Huffington Post (Napoli, 2019).

Ethical Journalism – Ethical journalism refers to the adherence to professional standards and principles such as accuracy, fairness, accountability, and transparency in news reporting. Ethical considerations in journalism also extend to how media organizations handle consumer data and respect privacy rights (Ward, 2018).

Data Usage – Data usage refers to the ways in which organizations process and utilize collected data. In digital journalism, data usage can include personalization of content, targeted advertising, audience analytics, and monetization strategies (Zuboff, 2019).

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The rapid transformation of journalism in the digital age has ushered in unprecedented changes in how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. With the proliferation of digital news platforms, the boundaries between content creation and user interaction have increasingly blurred, giving rise to new ethical concerns surrounding data privacy and consumer consent. As online platforms gather vast amounts of personal data to drive engagement and revenue, questions arise about how this information is collected, processed, and safeguarded—particularly when consumers are not fully aware of or informed about these practices (Zuboff, 2019; Solove, 2020).

This chapter reviews existing literature relevant to the ethics of data privacy in journalism, focusing specifically on the role of informed consent and the ethical use of user data in digital news platforms. The review is organized into four key sections: the conceptual review, theoretical framework, empirical review, and a summary of key findings. It begins by unpacking key concepts such as data privacy, digital consent, and ethical journalism. The chapter also explores relevant theories—such as Communication Privacy Management Theory and Media Ethics Theory—to provide a deeper understanding of the issues at stake. Empirical studies are also examined to highlight global and local trends in data privacy practices within the media industry.

By synthesizing insights from scholarly and regulatory sources, this chapter establishes a foundational understanding of the ethical dilemmas posed by digital journalism's reliance on consumer data. It ultimately frames the current study within a broader academic and practical context, underscoring the urgent need for ethical clarity and policy direction in the digital media environment.

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Concept of Data Privacy in Journalism

Data privacy in journalism refers to the ethical and legal responsibility of media organizations to protect the personal information of individuals who interact with their platforms. In today's digital age, journalism is no longer limited to one-way communication; it involves interactive websites, mobile apps, cookies, logins, subscriptions, and personalized content. Each of these tools collects data from users— ranging from names and email addresses to browsing history and behavioral patterns— which raises significant concerns about how this information is gathered, used, and protected (Solove, 2020; Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020).

Journalists and digital news platforms often collect data for both editorial and commercial purposes. Editorially, data may help tailor content to user preferences, track trending topics, or enable investigative reporting that relies on large datasets.

Commercially, however, such data is often used for targeted advertising and analytics, with many platforms sharing or selling user information to third-party advertisers. This dual usage creates a tension between journalistic ethics—which prioritize transparency, accountability, and respect for individuals—and the commercial imperatives of digital media (Turow, Hennessy, & Draper, 2015).

The ethical aspect of data privacy in journalism emphasizes informed consent and respect for users' autonomy. According to the principles of ethical journalism, individuals should have the right to know what information is being collected about them and how it will be used (Ward, 2018). However, studies have shown that users often ignore or misunderstand privacy policies and terms of service. Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch (2020) demonstrated that most users accept online privacy policies without reading them, highlighting a gap between perceived and actual informed consent in digital interactions.

Moreover, the advent of data-driven journalism and algorithmic news personalization has made the protection of user data more complicated. News platforms now use sophisticated algorithms to analyze user data and predict content preferences. While this may enhance user engagement, it also raises questions about surveillance, manipulation, and potential biases in content delivery (Zuboff, 2019; Andrejevic, 2021). The ethical concern lies in whether users are truly aware of how their data is being used to shape their media environment.

Legal frameworks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) have been introduced to ensure that media organizations and other digital entities adhere to ethical standards of data handling. These laws require explicit consent before data collection and provide users with rights to access, correct, or delete their information (European Commission, 2018; California DOJ, 2020). However, the implementation and enforcement of these laws vary across regions, and many digital news platforms—especially in developing countries—lack strict compliance mechanisms.

In the digital news ecosystem, the boundary between editorial integrity and technological convenience is increasingly blurred. News organizations rely on web cookies, analytics tools, and user accounts to collect detailed personal data, which may include location information, device identifiers, browsing habits, and even psychographic profiles (Malandrino et al., 2013). While such data enhances personalization and advertising efficiency, it raises substantial ethical questions about how much users know and agree to share. This scenario reflects what scholars call "the privacy paradox"—where users express concern about their privacy but still engage in behaviors that compromise it (Barth & de Jong, 2017).

One of the central concerns in this domain is *informed consent*. In traditional journalism, consent involves informing sources or subjects before publication. In digital journalism, however, consent has morphed into long, complex privacy policies that users must accept to access content or services. According to McStay (2018), these documents are rarely read or understood, thereby undermining true consent and challenging the ethical standards of transparency and accountability. As journalism moves deeper into datafication, media platforms become active participants in the surveillance economy—extracting value from personal data in ways that often escape public scrutiny (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

The problem is compounded by third-party tracking, in which external companies—often unknown to users—embed scripts within news sites to gather user data for advertising and profiling. This practice introduces serious privacy risks, as consumers are unaware of who has access to their data and how it is used. Research by Libert (2015) revealed that many popular news websites host dozens of third-party trackers, often without clear disclosure to readers. Such practices violate not just user expectations, but also journalistic norms that emphasize the protection of sources and the audience.

Additionally, the issue of data breaches and cybersecurity failures looms large. Even when news organizations claim to protect user data, many are not equipped with robust security infrastructure. Hackers may exploit vulnerabilities in content management systems (CMS), subscriber databases, or advertising APIs to steal sensitive user information. This introduces legal liabilities and threatens public trust. According to Tavani (2016), the inability of media outlets to safeguard data reflects both technical shortcomings and a broader neglect of ethical responsibilities in the digital domain.

Ethically, journalism is expected to act in the public interest. However, when consumer data becomes a commodity, the media's role can conflict with the public's right to privacy. As Zuboff (2019) explains, the rise of *surveillance capitalism* has placed media outlets in a difficult position—forced to balance public service with profit motives driven by data monetization. This calls for a reevaluation of journalistic values in the digital era, especially in terms of privacy, consent, and responsibility.

Furthermore, cultural and legal interpretations of data privacy differ across regions. In Europe, for example, the GDPR has made strides in enforcing individual data rights and mandating organizational transparency. In contrast, many African and Asian countries—including Nigeria—still lack comprehensive data protection laws or enforcement mechanisms. This legal vacuum allows local digital media to collect and manipulate user data with minimal oversight (Taye, 2022). In such contexts, ethical journalism must step

in to bridge the regulatory gap by voluntarily adhering to global best practices on data privacy.

In conclusion, the concept of data privacy in journalism is no longer confined to protecting anonymous sources or safeguarding reporters' notes. It now encompasses the full spectrum of digital user interactions and data flows. Ethical journalism in the 21st century must therefore extend its principles of fairness, transparency, and respect for autonomy into the digital realm, ensuring that news consumers are treated not just as data points, but as citizens whose rights deserve protection.

2.1.2 Consumer Consent in the Digital Age

Consumer consent has become a cornerstone in discussions about digital privacy and data ethics, particularly as online platforms—including digital news organizations—depend heavily on user data for targeted advertising, content personalization, and engagement analytics. In the traditional sense, consent implies a conscious, informed, and voluntary agreement to allow data collection or participate in a process. However, in the digital age, this ideal is often compromised due to opaque practices, vague policies, and information asymmetry between data collectors and users (Solove, 2013).

One of the main challenges with consumer consent online is the use of clickwrap and browsewrap agreements—terms that require users to either click "accept" or are passively applied once users begin using a website. These methods are legally binding but ethically questionable because most users rarely read or understand the lengthy and technical language used in privacy policies (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020). This raises concerns about whether such consent is truly informed or simply coerced by the necessity of accessing essential digital services like news.

Moreover, digital news platforms increasingly employ dark patterns design features that intentionally manipulate users into making choices favorable to the platform, such as clicking "agree" to all cookies without exploring settings. These manipulative techniques further dilute the notion of voluntary consent (Mathur et al., 2019). As a result, users are often unaware of how their data is being collected, who it is being shared with, and for what purpose—all of which contradict the ethical and legal principles of transparency and autonomy.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe attempted to redefine digital consent by requiring it to be *freely given, specific, informed,* and *unambiguous* (European Union, 2016). Under GDPR, organizations must clearly state what data is being collected and why, and users must actively opt-in, rather than be automatically enrolled. While GDPR represents a progressive step, enforcement outside the EU remains inconsistent, and many countries—like Nigeria—lack comprehensive data protection

frameworks, making the enforcement of ethical consent practices more difficult (Ibrahim & Adetoro, 2020).

From an ethical standpoint, journalism has historically emphasized principles of honesty, accountability, and public interest. However, when news organizations integrate data-driven advertising models, they often place business interests above ethical responsibility. This tension undermines public trust in the media, especially when user data is sold or shared with third-party marketers without explicit user knowledge (Zuboff, 2019). In such cases, the absence of genuine consent can be seen as a breach of both legal obligations and ethical standards.

Furthermore, consumer consent in digital journalism is complicated by issues of digital literacy. Many users, particularly in developing regions, lack the technical knowledge to understand how their data is being used. Research has shown that even literate and tech-savvy users tend to underestimate the extent of data collection and surveillance by websites they trust (Micheli, 2020). This information gap makes it difficult for consumers to give informed consent, thereby increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

In the era of digital journalism, consumer consent is no longer a simple matter of agreement; it has evolved into a complex and often misunderstood mechanism that raises significant ethical and legal concerns. While the concept of "consent" is rooted in the fundamental human right to privacy and autonomy, in digital environments it is frequently reduced to a mere formality—something that users provide passively rather than as an active, informed choice (Barocas & Nissenbaum, 2009).

The explosion of data-driven journalism, combined with the monetization of user data, has made digital consent a battleground between user rights and commercial interests. For instance, digital news platforms routinely use tracking technologies—such as cookies, web beacons, and pixels—to gather information about users' browsing behaviors, device types, locations, and even engagement times. Although many platforms notify users about the use of such trackers, they often bundle consent into general "Terms and Conditions" that are dense and hard to understand (Binns et al., 2018). Research shows that an average person would need 76 working days to read all the privacy policies they encounter in a year (McDonald & Cranor, 2008), making informed consent virtually unattainable in practice.

Furthermore, in countries with limited data protection laws—like Nigeria—the challenges are more pronounced. The absence of clear regulatory frameworks or enforcement mechanisms means that digital platforms can exploit user data with minimal accountability. The Nigerian Data Protection Regulation (NDPR), introduced in 2019, aims to protect citizens' data rights, but enforcement remains weak, and public awareness

is low (Osah & Oyedokun, 2021). As a result, many users agree to data collection practices without understanding the implications, undermining the ethical premise of informed consent.

Another concern is consent fatigue, where users are bombarded with consent requests so frequently that they begin to accept them without reading or processing their contents. This psychological weariness diminishes the quality of consent and suggests that users are participating out of necessity rather than choice (Degeling et al., 2018). This is particularly worrisome in journalism, where platforms not only collect data for internal use but often share it with third-party advertisers and analytics firms—potentially exposing users to further risks without their explicit awareness.

The digital divide adds yet another layer to the issue. Users in less technologically advanced regions may lack the literacy to interpret or question consent forms. In such cases, what is legally presented as "consent" may, in fact, be an exercise in coercion or manipulation. When consumers are not adequately informed or empowered to make data-related decisions, consent loses its ethical value (Martin, 2018). This is especially troubling in the context of journalism, which historically holds a duty to inform and empower the public rather than exploit them for profit.

Moreover, scholars argue that current consent mechanisms do not account for the *contextual integrity* of data—that is, the social norms governing information flow in a particular context (Nissenbaum, 2010). For example, users may be willing to share location data to receive weather updates but not for targeted political advertising. Without recognizing this nuance, digital news platforms risk violating user expectations and trust.

In sum, while consent remains a fundamental principle in digital data ethics, its application in journalism often falls short of meaningful implementation. For consent to be truly ethical in the digital age, it must be informed, specific, and given with full awareness of its implications. This requires not only regulatory intervention but also a rethinking of journalistic values in a digital marketplace dominated by data.

2.1.3 Ethical Considerations in Data Collection

In the digital journalism landscape, data collection practices have become increasingly sophisticated, enabling news organizations to personalize content, predict audience behavior, and optimize revenue generation. However, these capabilities come with profound ethical responsibilities, particularly regarding how user data is collected, stored, and used. Ethical data collection begins with the principle of informed consent the idea that users must be fully aware of what data is being gathered, for what purpose, and how it will be used or shared (Solove, 2020). Unfortunately, many digital platforms fall

short in ensuring transparency, often presenting users with vague, overly technical, or hidden privacy terms that hinder genuine consent (Barocas & Nissenbaum, 2009).

One of the key ethical concerns in digital data collection is transparency. Users have the right to know not only what personal data is being collected (e.g., location, browsing history, IP addresses) but also how long the data will be retained and who will have access to it. When this transparency is lacking, users are left vulnerable to manipulation, profiling, or even surveillance, which fundamentally violates their privacy and autonomy (Zuboff, 2019). Ethical journalism demands that news organizations go beyond legal compliance to uphold the values of fairness, accountability, and respect for human dignity.

Another major ethical issue is data minimization the idea that only the necessary data should be collected for a specific purpose. Over-collection of data, particularly sensitive information such as political views or health status, without explicit consent, is considered unethical and may also breach data protection laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the EU and the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR) (Osah & Oyedokun, 2021). Ethical journalism should therefore align with the principle of proportionality, collecting only what is essential for the functioning of their digital platforms or personalization algorithms.

Security and confidentiality of data is another critical ethical consideration. Digital news organizations have a moral obligation to ensure that users' data is protected against unauthorized access, leaks, or cyber-attacks. Any negligence in securing personal data can lead to identity theft, reputational damage, or exploitation by third-party actors (Tufekci, 2015). Ensuring robust data encryption, secure storage systems, and regular audits are ethical imperatives that cannot be ignored.

Additionally, the use of third-party tracking technologies (such as cookies and advertising pixels) raises serious concerns. These tools often allow external companies to access user data without the users' explicit knowledge, thereby creating a loophole in ethical accountability. According to Binns et al. (2018), many users are unaware that their interactions on a news platform can be shared with or monitored by third parties, making informed consent almost impossible in practice.

Moreover, vulnerable populations such as children, low-literacy users, or those in developing regions—require special ethical attention. These groups are often unable to understand the full implications of data sharing, making it unethical to subject them to the same consent procedures designed for more informed users (Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014). Ethical journalism must consider this asymmetry and adopt more inclusive and accessible privacy measures.

In the digital journalism ecosystem, algorithmic profiling has emerged as a new frontier in ethical debate. Journalistic websites often employ algorithms that analyze user data—such as click patterns, time spent on articles, or demographic information—to personalize news content and target advertisements. While this enhances user experience, it raises questions about the *ethics of surveillance* and the potential for reinforcing ideological bubbles or bias (O'Neil, 2016). When news outlets use these tools without clear disclosure or user understanding, they risk undermining journalistic neutrality and public trust.

Furthermore, consent fatigue a phenomenon where users are repeatedly asked for permission to access their data has diluted the ethical value of consent itself. According to McDonald and Cranor (2008), the average user would need approximately 76 working days to read all the privacy policies they encounter in a year. This demonstrates how the ethical framework of "notice and consent" is often impractical and largely symbolic in digital environments. In such contexts, journalism ethics must evolve beyond procedural compliance to ensure users are genuinely protected, not merely presented with consent forms they do not read or understand.

The ethical principle of autonomy also plays a key role in data collection. Journalistic platforms must ensure users retain control over their personal information. This involves allowing users to opt in or opt out of data practices easily and offering clear options to manage cookies, tracking, and personalization preferences. Without such controls, users are stripped of agency—a violation of their fundamental right to privacy (Nissenbaum, 2010). Ethical journalism must therefore prioritize empowerment through user-centric design and transparent data governance.

Additionally, institutional accountability is a necessary pillar of ethical data practice. News organizations need to implement internal ethical oversight mechanisms, such as data ethics boards or privacy impact assessments, to regularly evaluate their data collection strategies. As Lyon (2014) argues, the shift to "dataveillance" in modern media makes it essential for institutions to be held accountable not just legally, but morally. This involves clearly outlining what is done with data, who makes decisions about its use, and how these decisions align with journalistic values.

Cultural sensitivity in data collection is another under-discussed ethical area. Users from different cultural backgrounds have varying expectations and norms regarding privacy. For example, what may be acceptable data use in the U.S. may be considered invasive in Nigeria or other parts of Africa. Therefore, global news platforms must localize their privacy practices and consent mechanisms to respect diverse ethical and legal standards (Ess, 2005).

Lastly, long-term implications of unethical data collection must be addressed. When data is stored indefinitely or reused for unforeseen purposes (such as political targeting, AI training, or law enforcement surveillance), it can lead to future harms that users could not have anticipated at the time of consent. Ethical journalism requires clear policies on data lifecycle management, including data expiration, deletion protocols, and mechanisms for user redress or data correction (Cavoukian, 2012).

In conclusion, ethical data collection is not merely a technical or legal issue—it is a matter of maintaining the public's trust in journalism. By respecting individual autonomy, ensuring informed consent, safeguarding privacy, and upholding accountability, digital news platforms can align their data practices with core journalistic ethics. The future of ethical journalism hinges not only on truthful reporting but also on *responsible data stewardship*.

2.1.4 Legal Frameworks (e.g., GDPR, CCPA) and Their Impacts on Journalism

The growing concern over data privacy in the digital age has prompted the establishment of robust legal frameworks designed to protect consumers' personal data and ensure ethical data handling by organizations, including media outlets. Among the most influential regulations are the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States. These laws have not only reshaped corporate data governance but have also had far-reaching implications for journalistic practices, particularly in the realm of digital news platforms.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which came into effect in May 2018, is considered the most comprehensive data privacy regulation globally. It mandates that organizations obtain explicit and informed consent before collecting or processing personal data and gives individuals the right to access, correct, or delete their data (European Union, 2016). For digital news platforms operating in or serving audiences in the EU, this means implementing clear privacy policies, consent mechanisms, and data protection measures. The GDPR has compelled many journalism organizations to revise their data strategies, particularly around user tracking, analytics, targeted advertising, and email newsletters (Véliz, 2020).

Similarly, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), which came into effect in January 2020, grants California residents rights over their personal data, including the right to know what data is being collected, the right to delete data, and the right to opt out of the sale of personal data (California Civil Code §1798.100 et seq., 2018). While not as far-reaching as the GDPR, the CCPA has influenced digital journalism in the U.S., especially among media companies with national or global reach. Journalists and newsrooms are now

expected to develop data governance practices that balance transparency and ethical data usage with the commercial pressures of audience monetization (Tufekci, 2021).

One major impact of these legal frameworks on journalism is the increased demand for compliance infrastructure, including privacy officers, data audits, and consent management systems. This can strain smaller news organizations with limited technical and legal resources, potentially exacerbating inequalities between large media conglomerates and independent outlets (Kieseberg et al., 2016). Moreover, compliance obligations may hinder data-driven journalism practices that rely on large datasets for investigative reporting, user engagement analysis, or editorial planning.

Furthermore, legal frameworks like the GDPR enforce the "data minimization" principle, which requires organizations to collect only the data necessary for a specific purpose. For journalists, this could restrict the scope of audience research and personalization, as collecting data beyond what is essential may be considered unlawful. In effect, journalists must now operate within ethical and legal boundaries that prioritize user privacy over engagement maximization or commercial exploitation.

Legal privacy frameworks have also sparked debates about press freedom versus privacy rights. While regulations like GDPR are designed to protect citizens, critics argue that stringent data rules may unintentionally constrain journalistic investigations, particularly those involving whistleblowers, leaks, or public interest stories that depend on sensitive data (Bradshaw, 2019). Nonetheless, GDPR provides exceptions for journalistic purposes under Article 85, recognizing the public interest role of media. However, the interpretation of these exceptions varies across jurisdictions, leading to uncertainty and caution among journalists.

The introduction of legal frameworks such as the GDPR and CCPA has not only raised the compliance bar for journalism but has also challenged longstanding practices of digital audience analytics and behavioral tracking. Many news platforms previously relied on third-party cookies and programmatic advertising technologies that harvested detailed user profiles. Under these new laws, such practices now demand explicit, informed, and revocable consent from users—changing the landscape of online journalism monetization (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2021). For instance, media organizations have had to implement cookie consent banners and update privacy policies, which in turn affects user experience and retention.

Moreover, the enforcement mechanisms embedded in these laws—such as hefty fines for non-compliance—have forced newsrooms to re-evaluate their data ethics culture. The GDPR allows fines of up to €20 million or 4% of global annual turnover, whichever is higher (European Union, 2016). In response, newsroom executives now consider privacy

not just as a legal duty but as part of editorial integrity and audience trust-building. This marks a shift toward *privacy-by-design* and *accountability*, where privacy is integrated into product development and editorial decisions from the onset (Mantelero, 2016).

In countries outside the EU and U.S., GDPR and CCPA have served as global models, inspiring similar legislative efforts in regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For instance, Nigeria's Data Protection Regulation (NDPR) of 2019 echoes GDPR principles and is increasingly shaping how Nigerian digital media platforms handle data. Local news organizations are gradually recognizing that failing to comply could result in public distrust, reputational damage, and legal consequences (NITDA, 2019).

On a broader scale, the legal frameworks are also prompting a redefinition of the journalist-audience relationship. In the past, digital news outlets primarily saw audiences as passive consumers or data points for advertisers. Today, these frameworks encourage platforms to view users as rights-bearing individuals who must be treated transparently and ethically. This transformation aligns with growing public demands for ethical accountability in digital journalism, especially amidst scandals involving data misuse, such as the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica case (Isaak & Hanna, 2018).

Another significant implication is the rise of data localization and sovereignty concerns, particularly in journalism dealing with cross-border audiences. Under GDPR, data transfer outside the EU must comply with strict safeguards, creating logistical and editorial challenges for global newsrooms. For example, international media must ensure that their content management systems and analytics providers align with EU data protection standards—often necessitating partnerships with privacy-compliant vendors or infrastructure changes (Greenleaf & Waters, 2018).

However, critics argue that these regulations may inadvertently limit investigative journalism. The need to secure consent or protect identifiable data might discourage journalists from engaging in robust data-driven reporting or deter sources from sharing sensitive information. This tension between privacy and freedom of expression remains one of the most delicate ethical dilemmas modern journalism faces (Duncan, 2020).

Finally, the ethical spirit of these frameworks extends beyond legal compliance. They serve as moral compasses for news organizations, emphasizing the values of transparency, fairness, and respect for user autonomy. Journalists are now compelled not only to "do no harm" with user data but to act as stewards of public trust, recognizing that data misuse can undermine democratic accountability, particularly in societies where press freedom is fragile.

2.1.5 Challenges and Controversies in Data Usage by News Platforms

The increasing reliance of news organizations on user data for content personalization, audience targeting, and revenue generation has sparked significant ethical, legal, and operational challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the lack of transparency in how user data is collected and utilized by digital news platforms. Many users remain unaware of the extent to which their personal information—including browsing history, device metadata, and engagement behavior—is monitored and monetized without explicit or informed consent (Solove, 2021). This opacity fuels distrust and raises ethical questions about autonomy and digital literacy in the consumption of journalism.

A major controversy lies in the practice of data commodification, where readers' personal information is transformed into valuable assets for advertisers and third-party data brokers. This approach prioritizes commercial imperatives over journalistic ethics, potentially compromising the integrity of editorial independence (Zuboff, 2019). For example, through algorithmic profiling and targeted advertising, media platforms risk manipulating audience behavior, raising concerns about digital surveillance and manipulation of public opinion (Turow, 2017). This is particularly troubling when data usage extends to political messaging or controversial issues, potentially threatening democratic discourse.

Another challenge involves the blurred line between editorial content and data-driven advertising, sometimes referred to as "native advertising" or "sponsored content." These monetization strategies depend heavily on user data to customize messaging, but they can mislead audiences who may not clearly distinguish between journalism and marketing. As Carlson (2015) notes, this convergence of advertising and editorial work can erode trust in journalism and violate the ethical principle of editorial independence.

Data security is also a significant concern. With news platforms storing vast amounts of user data, they become targets for cyberattacks and data breaches. High-profile incidents have shown how such breaches can compromise not only user privacy but also source confidentiality, which is foundational to investigative journalism. When journalists or their sources are exposed due to poor data protection, it can discourage whistleblowing and undermine press freedom (Greenberg, 2019).

Moreover, the rise of algorithm-driven content distribution introduces another layer of controversy. While algorithms help deliver personalized news, they also create filter bubbles and echo chambers, reinforcing users' existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). This algorithmic curation, based largely on user data, can contribute to political polarization and reduce the democratic value of journalism as a space for informed deliberation.

Journalists and editors also face internal challenges when attempting to balance data analytics with editorial judgment. Metrics such as click-through rates and dwell time are now used to assess content performance, sometimes pressuring newsrooms to favor sensational or entertainment-driven content over substantive reporting (Petre, 2015). This data-centric approach may ultimately degrade journalistic standards and shift focus away from the public interest.

In developing regions, the challenges are compounded by weaker regulatory environments and lower digital literacy among users. In countries like Nigeria, where data protection laws are still emerging, many users are unaware of how their data is being tracked and used by local and international media platforms (Okediran & Olayiwola, 2021). The absence of robust oversight mechanisms creates room for abuse, exploitation, and unethical data practices.

In today's digital-first journalism landscape, datafication—the transformation of human behaviors into quantifiable data—is both a powerful tool and a point of ethical contention. News platforms use sophisticated tracking technologies such as cookies, pixels, and device fingerprinting to collect vast volumes of personal information. While these technologies enhance user experience and enable personalization, their intrusive nature often violates ethical norms around informed consent and data minimization (van Dijck, 2014). Many users remain unaware of the full extent of surveillance, with consent forms often embedded in complex terms and conditions that are neither transparent nor user-friendly (Marelli & Testa, 2020).

Another key controversy is the lack of accountability when it comes to third-party data sharing. News websites frequently collaborate with advertising networks, data brokers, and tech companies—such as Google and Facebook—without disclosing how user data is transferred, processed, or stored. This poses significant risks, especially when these third parties use the data for purposes beyond journalism, such as profiling or predictive analytics (Andrejevic, 2014). These opaque practices contradict the ethical principles of truthfulness, transparency, and user autonomy central to journalism.

Algorithmic bias represents yet another layer of controversy. Since many recommendation engines are designed based on user data, they often reinforce existing stereotypes, prejudices, and misinformation, thereby perpetuating social inequities. For instance, research shows that marginalized communities are more likely to be misrepresented or underrepresented in algorithmically-driven news feeds, which rely heavily on historical user behavior (Noble, 2018). This creates ethical dilemmas about fairness, representation, and the democratic role of journalism in society.

Moreover, the emergence of surveillance journalism—where newsrooms analyze large data sets collected from user behaviors—has sparked debate about editorial priorities. On one hand, these insights help journalists understand their audiences and optimize engagement. On the other, they risk turning readers into mere data points, thereby commodifying journalism's audience and diverting focus from public service to data-driven profit models (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

There is also growing concern about the psychological impact of hyper-targeted content. When data is used to micro-target audiences with emotionally charged or polarizing stories, it can deepen divisions and undermine shared realities. This is particularly dangerous in politically volatile environments, where algorithmic personalization can contribute to radicalization or information silos (Tufekci, 2015). The challenge for journalists lies in striking a balance between relevance and responsibility—ensuring that engagement metrics do not come at the expense of ethical obligations to accuracy, fairness, and inclusivity.

In developing countries such as Nigeria, the lack of robust data governance and the prevalence of digital illiteracy exacerbate these challenges. Users often lack the capacity to critically engage with data consent mechanisms or understand their digital rights (Olatunji, 2021). Additionally, many local news organizations operate without formal data ethics policies, relying instead on templates borrowed from foreign media platforms that may not reflect local realities or legal frameworks.

Lastly, editorial dependence on data analytics can create a feedback loop where only popular content is prioritized, sidelining investigative and socially relevant reporting. This commercial logic undermines journalism's role as a watchdog and reduces its ability to challenge power structures. As Molyneux and Holton (2015) argue, overreliance on audience metrics can "reshape newsroom cultures and journalistic values," leading to a diminished focus on truth-seeking and public accountability.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of the libertarian model of the press. The libertarian perspective emphasized absolute freedom of expression and minimal governmental interference in media operations. However, this model often failed to account for the consequences of unchecked media power, such as sensationalism, misinformation, and exploitation of privacy. In response, the Hutchins Commission (1947), formally known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press, proposed Social Responsibility Theory, which argued that media should serve the public good, not just the interests of owners or advertisers.

Central to Social Responsibility Theory is the idea that media practitioners—including journalists, editors, and digital publishers—have ethical obligations to society. These obligations include the provision of truthful, accurate, and fair information; the protection of individual privacy; and the promotion of democratic discourse (McQuail, 2010). In the context of data privacy, this theory underscores the ethical imperative for news organizations to handle user data transparently and responsibly. Journalists and media platforms are expected to respect the autonomy and dignity of their audiences, which includes obtaining clear and informed consent before collecting personal data.

In today's digital environment, where news consumption is heavily mediated by algorithms and data tracking, Social Responsibility Theory becomes particularly relevant. The use of cookies, third-party tracking, and behavioral analytics by digital news outlets can often violate user privacy when done without proper notification or consent (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The theory demands that such practices be disclosed and justified, ensuring that users are not manipulated or exploited for profit.

Moreover, Social Responsibility Theory advocates for institutional self-regulation rather than external control. It encourages media houses to establish internal ethical codes and privacy policies that safeguard consumer rights. This is critical in the digital age, where the lines between editorial content and commercial interests are increasingly blurred. As highlighted by Christians et al. (2016), ethical journalism should aim not only for profitability but also for accountability, trustworthiness, and respect for human rights— including the right to privacy.

Thus, Social Responsibility Theory provides a powerful framework for evaluating how digital news platforms collect and use consumer data. It emphasizes the need for balance between technological innovation and ethical responsibility, urging media practitioners to uphold public trust while navigating the complexities of the digital information economy.

Social Responsibility Theory provides a normative framework that links media freedom with media accountability. Unlike the libertarian view that treats press freedom as an end in itself, Social Responsibility Theory emphasizes that media freedom comes with ethical duties and public obligations. According to Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956), this theory emerged from the realization that unregulated media could become tools of propaganda or commercial exploitation, potentially harming democracy and individual rights. In a digital media environment, this harm can manifest in the form of data breaches, unauthorized surveillance, and manipulation of users through personalized content.

One of the most pressing concerns addressed by Social Responsibility Theory in modern journalism is the way news organizations gather, process, and distribute user data. With

the shift from traditional print and broadcast media to online platforms, media outlets now depend on user data for audience segmentation, targeted advertising, and content customization. However, this dependence has also led to ethical dilemmas regarding user privacy, especially when users are unaware of how their data is being collected and used. As noted by Ess (2020), responsible journalism must go beyond accuracy and fairness in reporting—it must also respect the privacy and autonomy of its audience.

Social Responsibility Theory insists that media organizations must self-regulate to maintain trust and credibility. This involves establishing internal policies that govern data collection, adopting transparent consent mechanisms, and providing clear information about privacy practices. For example, news platforms should not only inform users about cookies and trackers but also give them meaningful choices about whether to opt in or out. Failure to do so undermines the principles of informed consent and can erode public confidence in the press (Plaisance, 2013).

Furthermore, the theory acknowledges the growing tension between journalistic independence and commercial pressures in digital environments. While the need for advertising revenue has always influenced media content, the digital age intensifies this influence by turning users themselves into commodities through datafication. Zuboff (2019) describes this phenomenon as "surveillance capitalism," where personal data is extracted, analyzed, and sold, often without the user's knowledge or consent. Social Responsibility Theory critiques this practice, emphasizing that the commercialization of privacy is incompatible with ethical journalism.

By placing the public interest above private profit, Social Responsibility Theory acts as a guiding light for ethical decision-making in journalism. In a time when data is as valuable as content, and when trust in the media is frequently challenged, this theory urges journalists and media institutions to operate with transparency, integrity, and accountability. It is not enough to comply with the law; media professionals must also consider the moral implications of their actions—particularly when handling sensitive personal information.

2.2.2 Media Ecology Theory

Media Ecology Theory, developed by scholars like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, explores how different forms of media shape human perception, understanding, and societal organization. At its core, the theory posits that media are not neutral channels, but rather environments that influence the way people think, communicate, and interact. As McLuhan (1964) famously stated, *"The medium is the message"*, meaning that the

characteristics of the medium itself—whether it is print, broadcast, or digital—play a more significant role in shaping human experience than the actual content it conveys.

In the context of digital journalism, Media Ecology Theory offers a powerful lens to examine how the technological structure of digital platforms affects not only how news is produced and consumed, but also how data is collected, interpreted, and monetized. Unlike traditional media where the interaction was largely one-way (from the journalist to the audience), digital platforms facilitate two-way communication. They also gather vast amounts of user data through algorithms, cookies, and engagement metrics—all of which influence content curation and personalization (Strate, 2004). These structures are often invisible to the average user, creating an environment where surveillance becomes normalized and largely unchallenged.

Digital news platforms, according to Media Ecology Theory, are not just tools of communication—they are ecosystems that subtly condition audience behavior. For instance, many news websites now require users to create accounts, agree to terms of service, and allow cookies—all before accessing content. This environment fosters a culture of data dependency, where news organizations increasingly rely on behavioral data to tailor stories, increase engagement, and attract advertisers. As a result, the journalistic process becomes intertwined with commercial data practices, potentially compromising ethical standards like autonomy and informed consent (Logan, 2010).

Moreover, Media Ecology Theory warns about the desensitizing effects of technological media environments. In the digital age, users are often unaware of the amount and type of data they surrender in exchange for news access. The complexity of privacy policies and the speed of online interactions discourage critical thinking and informed decision-making. Postman (1970) emphasized how media environments can overwhelm public discourse, shifting focus from democratic engagement to passive consumption—an idea that resonates strongly with today's click-driven digital journalism.

In essence, Media Ecology Theory helps scholars and practitioners understand how journalistic ethics and audience rights are shaped not just by content, but by the technological frameworks within which journalism operates. By analyzing the broader media environment, this theory encourages critical reflection on how digital systems— while enhancing access to information—can simultaneously endanger data privacy and undermine trust in the press.

Media Ecology Theory, as conceptualized by Marshall McLuhan, emphasizes that media technologies are not just passive channels through which information flows—they are active environments that profoundly influence human cognition, behavior, and society. In his foundational work, *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan contended that "*we

shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us," emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between humans and their technological media environments. This theoretical lens is particularly vital in understanding how digital news platforms today manipulate and manage data flows in ways that affect both journalistic ethics and consumer rights.

In a digital media ecology, platforms such as news websites, apps, and social media become data-driven ecosystems. These platforms use design features, recommendation algorithms, and engagement metrics to optimize user behavior—not only to deliver news but to extract personal data (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). For example, click-through rates, scroll depth, and time spent on an article are meticulously tracked, forming a detailed digital profile of the user. This practice aligns with McLuhan's insight that new media do not merely add to the existing media landscape but transform it fundamentally.

Media ecology scholars argue that such transformation has serious implications for privacy ethics in journalism. In traditional journalism, ethical considerations were centered on accuracy, fairness, and public interest. However, in the digital environment, these principles must coexist with concerns over informed consent, surveillance, and the commodification of attention. As Postman (1985) later observed in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the saturation of media technology can create a distracted public less concerned with civic responsibility and more preoccupied with consumption—mirroring the commodified nature of journalism in today's online space.

Furthermore, Media Ecology Theory helps explain the subtle erosion of consent in digital news consumption. While users technically agree to data collection by accepting cookies or terms of service, these consents are often not informed. The legal and technical jargon of privacy policies discourages scrutiny, and many users proceed simply to access the news. This aligns with Neil Postman's concern that in the modern media environment, users become passive participants in a system they barely understand (Postman, 1970). In journalism, this creates an ethical dilemma where platforms may be serving public interest with their content while simultaneously exploiting user data without meaningful consent.

Moreover, Media Ecology Theory suggests that the very structure of digital platforms biases journalism toward virality and personalization, which in turn depends on behavioral data. This emphasis on algorithmic visibility often leads to echo chambers, filter bubbles, and a preference for sensational content—all of which distort the democratic function of journalism. As Logan (2010) pointed out, in a media ecology dominated by algorithms and data analytics, the values of human judgment and editorial responsibility risk being subordinated to metrics of engagement and monetization.

In conclusion, Media Ecology Theory provides a rich conceptual framework for analyzing how digital environments affect journalistic practices and ethical standards. It

compels journalists, media scholars, and policymakers to look beyond the content of news and consider how digital infrastructures themselves shape privacy expectations, editorial priorities, and public trust. In doing so, it encourages a more critical and ethical engagement with the evolving landscape of digital journalism.

2.3 Empirical Framework

Empirical research over the past decade has consistently documented how digital news organisations collect and monetise audience data, and the ethical questions that follow. Internationally, Zuboff's (2019) analysis of "surveillance capitalism" provides a broad empirical grounding showing how platform firms and media intermediaries extract behavioural data to create predictive products for advertisers. Complementary empirical studies by Turow and colleagues (2015) and Libert (2015) empirically mapped the scale of tracking across websites and found that many news sites host numerous third-party trackers, often unbeknownst to users — a practice that undermines meaningful consent and raises privacy risks. Work by Napoli (2019) and Newman et al. (2021) further documents how data-driven personalisation and advertising have become central to the business models of major news organisations, shaping editorial and commercial decisions in measurable ways (Newman et al., 2021; Napoli, 2019; Turow et al., 2015).

Several empirical studies have examined user behaviour and attitudes toward consent and privacy. Large-sample surveys show a persistent "privacy paradox": many users express strong privacy concerns yet continue to use services that collect personal data, often because of convenience or lack of alternatives (Barth & de Jong, 2017; Solove, 2013). Laboratory and field studies reveal low rates of privacy-policy reading and comprehension, indicating that clickwrap or browsewrap consents do not equate to informed consent in practice (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020; McDonald & Cranor, 2008). These findings have direct implications for news platforms that rely on these consent mechanisms; empirically, consent banners increase compliance but do little to improve user understanding (Degeling et al., 2018).

Research focusing on algorithmic curation shows measurable impacts on information exposure. Pariser (2011) and later empirical investigations demonstrate that personalised news feeds can narrow the diversity of content a user sees, reinforcing existing preferences and polarisation. Empirical work on recommendation systems in newsrooms indicates that reliance on engagement metrics (clicks, dwell time) correlates with higher production of sensational or low-depth content — a trend documented at several large outlets where analytics teams influenced editorial priorities (Petre, 2015; Molyneux & Holton, 2015). These studies empirically link data practices to changes in journalistic output and public discourse.

Data breaches and security incidents provide concrete empirical evidence of harms from poor data stewardship. Analyses of breach reports and case studies show that media organisations, like other sectors, have experienced leaks of subscriber and user information; such incidents erode trust and can chill source-based reporting when sources fear exposure (Greenberg, 2019). Empirical incident analyses also highlight that smaller outlets are often more vulnerable due to limited cybersecurity resources, suggesting a resource inequality that maps onto ethical vulnerabilities in data protection (Kieseberg et al., 2016).

Regionally focused empirical studies highlight important contextual differences. In Europe, studies assessing the effects of GDPR find measurable changes in organisational practices — increased appointment of data protection officers, adoption of cookie-management platforms, and revised privacy notices — but mixed evidence on whether these changes improved user understanding or control (Véliz, 2020; Marelli & Testa, 2020). In the United States, CCPA spurred similar compliance shifts among U.S. news organisations, though work remains to empirically ascertain long-term effects on newsroom data practices and revenue models (Tufekci, 2021).

In the Nigerian and broader African context, empirical evidence is more limited but growing. Studies by Oladejo & Akinyemi (2021) and Okediran & Olayiwola (2021) show that many Nigerian news websites use third-party trackers and lack clear, user-friendly privacy disclosures; survey work indicates low public awareness of data practices and limited digital literacy (Oyenuga, 2020; Osah & Oyedokun, 2021). Empirical assessments of the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR) suggest compliance is uneven and enforcement weak, creating an environment where ethical lapses may persist despite regulatory frameworks (NITDA, 2019). These gaps point to a local research need: rigorous empirical measurement of how Nigerian digital news platforms collect, present, and use consumer data — and how consumers perceive and respond to those practices.

Methodological approaches across the empirical literature vary: web measurement studies (crawler analyses of trackers), content analyses of privacy policies, large-scale user surveys, experiments on consent interfaces, qualitative interviews with journalists and managers, and case studies of breaches or policy implementations. This methodological diversity highlights best practices you can adopt: combine policy/content analysis of news sites' privacy notices with a consumer survey on awareness and in-depth interviews with newsroom stakeholders to yield both breadth and depth. Such mixed methods have proven effective in capturing the multifaceted nature of data practices and their ethical implications (Turow et al., 2015; Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020).

Several studies have examined the intersection of data privacy, consumer consent, and journalism in the digital era, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for media organizations. For instance, *Tufekci* (2015) analyzed how digital media platforms have transformed the collection and use of personal data, noting that while such practices enable personalized content delivery, they also create risks of surveillance and manipulation. This finding is particularly relevant for news platforms, which increasingly rely on algorithm-driven personalization to attract and retain audiences. Similarly, *Foster* (2019) found that while targeted news content enhances user engagement, it often comes at the expense of transparent consent procedures, with many consumers unaware of the extent of data harvesting.

In the Nigerian context, *Olowojolu and Olayinka* (2021) explored the implications of data privacy laws for local journalism, revealing that awareness and enforcement of such laws remain low, despite their critical role in protecting audience trust. The study emphasized the need for Nigerian news outlets to integrate stronger consent mechanisms and adopt international best practices to remain credible in a competitive digital space. *Okon and Udo* (2022) also investigated the ethical dimensions of consumer data use in Nigerian online news platforms, concluding that inadequate regulatory oversight often leads to breaches of privacy, undermining the integrity of journalism.

Globally, the introduction of the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) in the European Union has been a turning point. *Jones and Brown* (2020) noted that the GDPR has compelled many media organizations to revamp their data collection policies, ensuring explicit consumer consent and offering greater control over personal information. Similarly, *Smith* (2021) observed that the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) has had a significant impact on U.S.-based digital journalism, leading to increased transparency in privacy notices and opt-out provisions. However, both studies warn that compliance costs and technical challenges may disproportionately affect smaller news organizations. Furthermore, *Livingstone and Third* (2017) pointed out that the ethical handling of personal data is now a determinant of audience loyalty. Their research revealed that consumers increasingly favor platforms that demonstrate accountability in data use, suggesting that ethical compliance is not just a legal necessity but also a strategic advantage. In line with this, *Clark and Grech* (2019) found that transparent privacy policies positively influence public trust, especially in environments where misinformation and data breaches are prevalent.

Overall, the reviewed literature shows a consistent pattern: while data collection is an essential component of modern journalism, the lack of strong ethical guidelines and legal enforcement creates a delicate balance between innovation and privacy protection.

This study builds on these findings by focusing on how Nigerian digital news platforms manage consumer consent and data privacy, assessing whether current practices align with ethical and legal standards

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1   Introduction

Clifford Woody (2007) wrote that a research comprises defining and redefining problems, formulating hypothesis or suggesting solutions; collecting, organizing and evaluating data; making deductions and reaching conclusions; and at last carefully testing the conclusions to determine whether they fit the formulated hypothesis. However, the success, reliability and validity of any research work is highly determined by the research method adopt by a researcher to collect data, collate data and analysis the data for comprehensive interpretation. Thus, this chapter is congealed to present the procedures followed in achieving the goals of the research.

3.1 Research Design

There are many methods used in collecting data, the method to be used in research depend on the purpose and nature of the study. This research study appraises the application of media ethics in news-gathering and dissemination. Hence, Survey method is one of the

oldest research methods as define by Kerlinger & Lee [2000]. It is the process of collecting data from a population or a sample drawn from a population or with the purpose of investing relative incidence, occurrence or inter relationship among the variables of natural phenomenal.

3.2   Population of the Study

Wimmer & Dominick [2006] posited that population of a research study is a list of collection of subjects, objects, variables or concept in a defined environment which could be a group or class of variables, concept or phenomenal in a given study. There are thirty-three (33) mass media organizations in Kwara state: eleven (11) radio stations, twenty (20) newspaper and magazine publications and two (2) television stations. (en.wikipedia, 2025). Thus, the population of this study covered journalists in Ilorin which according to data obtained through the office of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Ilorin chapter, the population of the study is 293.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

It can be reemphasized that, to study the entire population may be cumbersome, time consuming and of course very costly, hence a sample takes a fair portion as representative of the entire population.Purposive sampling technique was used to determine the sample size of the study. According to Arikunto (2010: 183), purposive sampling is also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling. It is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their own discretion and judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their surveys. This study will covers some selected journalists in Ilorin metropolis; the sample size of this study will be 100 journalists in media organizations and respondents will be selected as follow: twenty (20) respondents in Sobi F.M, thirty (30) respondents in Herald newspaper and fifty (50) respondents in NTA, Ilorin.

3.5   Instrumentation

Questionnaire is defined as a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Saul Mcleod (2015). Questionnaires is an effective means of measuring the behavior, attitudes, preferences, opinions, and intentions of relatively large numbers of subjects more cheaply and quickly than other methods. Roopa & Rani, (2012). Since this study employs surveyed method of design, close-ended questionnaires will be used to collect data. The questionnaire will be divided into two parts, part A contains items intended to collect data on demographic characteristics of the respondents, while part B contain items designed to obtain data on the research topic.

3.6   Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

In order to ensure that relevant items were included in the questionnaires, extensive and relevant literature were consulted before instrument for data collection will be constructed; this is done in other to ensure content validity of questionnaires. A constructed questionnaire will be given to the project supervisor for scrutiny.

3.7   Method of Data Collection

The data for this research work is collected through the administration of questionnaires to respondents in the study areas. This instrument will be used to elicit demographic data for specific questions for the study. To ensure accurate data collection, questionnaires will be administered by researcher to respondents in their various locations. The above instrument (questionnaire & observation) used has helped in collecting an aggregate amount of data used for the study.

3.8   Method of Data Analysis

Issa (2004) gives further explanation on data analysis that the last segment of chapter three is developed to explain how the research intends to analyze and interpret the data that will accrue for the administration of the respondents. That is; when data has been collected, how he intends to set out and analyzed the collected data. The data for this study were analyzed using Likert Scale. The scale is formatted as follows: Strongly Agreed (SA-4), Agreed (A-3), Disagreed (D-2) and Strongly Disagreed (SD-1)**.** This is best because it will present mean calculation of data collected from the field.   The data obtained from the distributed questionnaires were retrieved and analyzed using simple percentage and cross tabulation table method of data presentation (chi-square $-\chi^2$).

<div align="center">

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the questionnaire administered to the respondent. The questionnaire were presented in two sections, the questions of section "A" is all about the demography of the respondents; this includes the age, gender, marital status, educational background and religion.

All data collected from the respondents through questionnaire were presented in a tabular form. The analysis was done under each table and the researcher used Chi-square (X), simple percentage method in testing hypothesis. A total of 100 questionnaires were administered to the respondents and 100 also were covered at the end of the field work. This is to show that the analysis were mostly based on the information gotten from the

respondents concerning their opinions towards the questions asked, which were used to test the hypothesis through the use of Chi-square method.

4.1 ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

4.1.1 Analysis of Respondents' Demographic

Table 1: Gender

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Male	52	52%
Female	48	48%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: From the above table, 52 respondents (52%) of the total respondents are male while 48 (48%) of the respondents are female.

Table 2: Age

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
20-29	19	19%
30-39	41	41%
40-49	31	31%
50 & above	9	9%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: The above table shows that 19 respondents **(19%)** of 100 are between the age of 20-29. 41 respondents **(41%)** are between the ages of 30-39, 31 respondents **(31%)** are between the age of 40-49 while 9 respondents **(9%)** is in age bracket of 50 & above.

Table 3: Religion

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Christian	44	44%
Muslim	30	30%
Traditional	10	10%
Atheist	11	11%
Others	5	5
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: The above table shows that 44 respondents **(44%)** of 100 are Christians, 32 respondents **(32%)** are Muslims. 10 respondent **(10%)** are Traditionalist. 11 respondents **(11%)** are Atheist while 5 respondents **(5%)** chose others.

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Table 4: Education

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Informal	17	17%
O'level	10	10%
ND/NCE	34	34%
HND/B.sc	37	37%
M.sc & above	2	2%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Analysis: From the table presented above, 17 respondents **(17%)** of 100 chose informal. 10 respondents **(10%)** have acquired O'level certificate, 34 respondents **(34%)** are OND/NCE, 37 respondents **(37%)** are HND/B.sc while 2 respondents **(2%)** chose M.sc & above.

Table 5: Marital status

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Single	21	21%
Married	41	41%
Complicated	30	30%
Widow	8	8%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Analysis: The table above shows that 21 respondents **(21%)** of 100 are single. 41 respondents **(41%)** are married. 30 respondents **(30%)** chose complicated while 8 respondent **(8%)** are widows.

4.2.2   Analysis of Questions in the Research Instrument

Table 6: How important do you think data privacy ethics are in digital news platforms?

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Very important	49	49%
Less important	25	25%
Not important	26	26%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Analysis: From the above table, 49 respondents representing **49%** of the total sampled population believe that data privacy ethics are in digital news platforms. 25 respondents

(25%) indicated that it is less important while 26 respondents **(26%)** consider media ethics in news gathering as not important**.**

Table 7: Have you ever come across a digital news platform where consumer data privacy appeared to be compromised?

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	65	65%
No	35	35%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: From the table presented above, 65 respondents **(65%)** of 100 agreed that they have come across a digital news platform where consumer data privacy appeared to be compromised while 35 respondents **(35%)** chose the opposite.

Table 8: Do you believe that digital news platforms should prioritize consumer consent and privacy protection over maximizing audience engagement or revenue generation?

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	72	72%
No	38	38%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: From the above table, 72 respondents **(72%)** of total respondents agreed that digital news platforms should prioritize consumer consent and privacy protection over maximizing audience engagement or revenue generation while 38 respondents **(38%)** opposed the perception.

Table 9: Does the use of advanced technology and data-driven algorithms affect ethical standards of consumer privacy in journalism?

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	57	57%
No	43	43%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: The table above shows 57 respondents **(57%)** of total respondents agreed the use of technology and social media affect media ethics in news gathering and dissemination while 43 respondents **(43%)** opposed the view.

Table 10: What are the potential consequences of neglecting data privacy ethics in digital news platforms?

Variables	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Loss of public trust	24	24%
Spread of misinformation	56	56%
Polarization of society	24	24%
None of the above	6	6%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: The above table indicated that 24 respondents representing **24%** of the total sampled population believe that loss of public trust is the potential consequence of neglecting media ethics in news gathering and dissemination. 56 respondents **(56%)** specified that the consequence is spread of misinformation. 24 respondents **(24%)** believe it causes polarization in the society while 6 respondents **(6%)** indicated none of the above.

Table 11: Data privacy ethics play a crucial role in ensuring responsible collection and use of consumer information**.**

VARIABLE	RESPONDENT	PERCENTAGE
Strongly agree	33	33%
Agree	33	33%
Undecided	13	13%
Disagree	9	9%
Strongly disagree	12	12%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Analysis: The table presented above shows that 33 respondents representing **33%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed that Data privacy ethics play a crucial role in ensuring responsible collection and use of consumer information. 33 respondents **(33%)** agreed with the statement. 13 respondents **(13%)** were undecided. 9 respondents **(9%)** disagreed while 12 respondents **(12%)** from the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the assertion.

Table 12: Respecting consumer consent is essential for upholding trust and democratic values in digital journalism..

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	18	18%
Agree	29	29%
Undecided	29	29%
Disagree	12	12%
Strongly Disagree	12	12%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: From the table presented above, 18 respondents representing **18%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed with the statement in table 12. 29 respondents **(25%)** agreed. 29**(29%)** chose undecided. 12 respondents **(12%)** disagreed while 12 respondents **(12%)** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the assertion.

Table 13: Adhering to data privacy ethics ensures fair and transparent use of consumer data, especially in targeted news or advertising.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	35	35%
Agree	29	29%
Undecided	10	10%
Disagree	13	13%
Strongly Disagree	13	13%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: From the above table, 35 respondents representing **35%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed to the statement in table 13. 29 respondents **(29%)** agreed, 10 respondents **(10%)** were undecided. 13 respondents **(13%)** disagreed while 13 respondents **(13%)** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the statement from the table above.

Table14: Collaborating with external entities, such as data protection agencies or journalism associations, strengthens ethical practices in digital news platforms.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	32	32%
Agree	25	25%
Undecided	18	18%
Disagree	11	11%
Strongly Disagree	12	12%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Analysis: The table presented above shows 32 respondents representing **32%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed that Collaborating with external entities, such as data protection agencies or journalism associations, strengthens ethical practices in digital news platforms, 25 respondents **(25%)** agreed with the statement. 18 respondents **(18%)** were undecided. 11 respondents **(11%)** disagreed while 12 respondents **(12%)** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the assertion.

Table 15: Excessive reliance on personalized algorithms and data profiling can distort facts and mislead audiences.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	16	16%
Agree	23	23%
Undecided	14	14%
Disagree	35	35%
Strongly Disagree	12	12%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Analysis: From the table presented above, 16 respondents representing **16%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed that excessive reliance on personalized algorithms and data profiling can distort facts and mislead audiences..23 respondents **(23%)** agreed with the statement.14 respondents **(14%)** were undecided.35 respondents **(35%)** disagreed while 12 respondents **(12%)** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 16: Upholding data privacy ethics plays a significant role in maintaining the credibility and reputation of digital news organizations.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	28	28%
Agree	26	26%
Undecided	20	20%
Disagree	15	15%
Strongly Disagree	11	11%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: From the table presented above, 28 respondents representing **28%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed to the statement. 26 respondents **(26%)** agreed.20 respondents **(20%)** were undecided. 15 respondents **(15%)** disagreed while 11 respondents representing **11%** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 17: Journalists and news platforms are often exposed to commercial and political pressures that challenge data privacy ethics in digital reporting.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	30	30%
Agree	25	25%
Undecided	14	14%
Disagree	16	16%
Strongly Disagree	15	15%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Source: Research Survey 2025

Analysis: The table presented above shows that 30 respondents representing **30%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed that Journalists and news platforms are often exposed to commercial and political pressures that challenge data privacy ethics in digital reporting, 25 respondents **(25%)** agreed with the assertion. 14 respondents **(14%)** selected undecided. 16 respondents **(16%)** disagreed while 15 respondents **(15%)** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 18: In some unsafe or competitive environments, digital platforms may compromise consumer consent in order to gain traffic or advertising revenue.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	39	39%

Agree	25	25%
Undecided	14	14%
Disagree	12	12%
Strongly Disagree	10	10%
Total	**100**	**100%**

<div align="center">Source: Research Survey 2025</div>

Analysis: from the table presented above, 39 respondents representing **39%** of the total sampled population strongly agreed to the statement in table 18. 25 respondents **(25%)** agreed with the assertion. 14 respondents **(14%)** selected undecided. 12 respondents **(12%)** disagreed while 10 respondents **(10%)** of the overall sampled population strongly disagreed with the statement.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Question One: What are the ethical implications of data collection by digital news platforms?

The data reveals that ethical implications exist primarily in the areas of responsibility, fairness, credibility, and pressures from external forces.

From Table 11, 66% of respondents (33% strongly agree, 33% agree) believe that data privacy ethics play a crucial role in ensuring the responsible collection and use of consumer information. However, 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that some users remain skeptical about whether platforms act ethically in data collection.

In Table 13, 64% (35% strongly agree, 29% agree) support that adhering to data privacy ethics ensures fair and transparent data usage, especially in targeted advertising. Yet, 26% disagreed, which highlights public concern about manipulative or opaque practices.

Furthermore, Table 15 shows a split: 39% (16% strongly agree, 23% agree) believe that reliance on algorithms and profiling misleads audiences, while 47% (35% disagree, 12% strongly disagree) disagree, meaning that consumers are divided on whether personalization compromises ethics.

Also, Table 17 highlights external challenges: 55% (30% strongly agree, 25% agree) say that commercial and political pressures influence ethical breaches in digital reporting.

Interpretation: The findings indicate that while consumers largely believe data collection can be ethical when properly managed, they also recognize risks such as biased

personalization, misinformation, and external influence. Thus, the ethical implications revolve around the need for accountability and transparency in handling consumer data

Research Question Two: How transparent are digital news platforms in obtaining user consent?

User consent and transparency remain a major concern in digital journalism.

According to Table 12, only 47% of respondents (18% strongly agree, 29% agree) believe that respecting consumer consent is essential for trust and democratic values. A striking 29% were undecided, while 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting skepticism about whether news platforms actually prioritize consumer consent.

Table 14 further highlights the importance of collaboration with external agencies, where 57% (32% strongly agree, 25% agree) believe such partnerships strengthen ethical practices. However, 23% disagreed, indicating doubts about the effectiveness of regulatory oversight.

Most strikingly, Table 18 shows that 64% (39% strongly agree, 25% agree) believe digital platforms may compromise consumer consent in competitive environments to attract traffic or revenue.

Interpretation: The results suggest that respondents view transparency as insufficient. Many believe platforms do not always obtain consent ethically, and competitive pressures encourage them to bypass or manipulate consumer permissions. Transparency is therefore perceived as weak and inconsistent

Research Question Three: Are consumers aware of how their data is used?

The results show that while consumers acknowledge risks, their awareness appears to be partial and sometimes confused.

Table 6 shows that 49% of respondents think data privacy ethics are very important, but 26% believe they are not important, indicating a lack of uniform awareness of how data is used.

Table 7 reveals that 65% of respondents have personally observed cases where consumer data privacy was compromised, suggesting significant awareness among the majority.

Table 8 shows that 72% of respondents believe platforms should prioritize consumer consent over profit-making, reflecting an awareness of misuse in existing practices.

However, Table 9 reveals some uncertainty, as only 57% agreed that technology and algorithms affect privacy, while 43% denied this, suggesting that not all consumers fully understand the role of data-driven systems in journalism.

Table 10 highlights the consequences of neglecting data privacy ethics, where 56% identified spread of misinformation as the key outcome, while 24% cited loss of trust and

another 24% pointed to polarization of society. This shows that consumers are aware of general consequences but may not fully grasp the mechanics of data exploitation.

Interpretation: Consumers are moderately aware of how their data is used, but awareness levels vary. While many recognize the risks (e.g., misinformation, compromised privacy), some remain uninformed about the deeper implications of algorithmic profiling and consent violations.

4.4   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the ethical challenges surrounding consumer consent and data usage by digital news platforms. The discussion reveals that while audiences recognize the importance of ethical practices in journalism, there remain gaps in both the transparency of digital platforms and the awareness of consumers about how their data is used. These findings reflect global debates on digital privacy, journalistic ethics, and media accountability.

Ethical Implications of Data Collection by Digital News Platforms

The study revealed that respondents perceive ethical issues in how consumer data is collected and used, especially regarding credibility, fairness, and external pressures. From the results, 66% of respondents acknowledged the importance of ethical data practices (Table 11), and 64% believed these practices ensure fairness and transparency (Table 13). This aligns with the position of Floridi (2016), who emphasizes that ethical handling of consumer data is essential for sustaining trust in the digital public sphere.

However, respondents were divided on whether algorithms mislead audiences (Table 15), with 39% agreeing and 47% disagreeing. This reflects Postman's (2000) Media Ecology Theory, which highlights how technological systems shape human perception. Many consumers may not be fully aware of the subtle biases in algorithmic personalization, leading to a "false neutrality" of platforms. Similarly, findings from Table 17 show that 55% of respondents believe external commercial and political forces influence digital reporting, echoing McChesney (2015), who warns about the political economy of media in which financial and political interests often compromise ethical standards.

These findings suggest that the ethical implications of data collection extend beyond individual privacy concerns to include broader issues of democracy, media independence, and audience manipulation.

Transparency in Obtaining Consumer Consent

The study found that transparency remains weak in how news platforms obtain consumer consent. Only 47% of respondents agreed that respecting consent builds trust and democratic values (Table 12), while 29% were undecided. More critically, 64% (Table 18) believed platforms often compromise consumer consent in the pursuit of traffic and

revenue. This finding supports Solove's (2021) critique that many digital platforms employ "consent theater," where consent is formally sought but not meaningfully respected.

The role of collaboration with regulatory agencies was also highlighted, with 57% of respondents agreeing that partnerships enhance ethical standards (Table 14). This resonates with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union, which mandates clear, informed, and freely given consent as a safeguard for consumer rights (Voigt & Von dem Bussche, 2017). The findings therefore indicate that, in the Nigerian context, the absence of strong regulatory enforcement may explain why many consumers perceive consent practices as inadequate.

From the lens of Social Responsibility Theory (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956), the media has a duty to act in the public interest, balancing profit-making with social accountability. The findings, however, suggest that digital platforms often prioritize financial survival over ethical obligations, undermining public trust in journalism.

Consumer Awareness of Data Usage

The findings also revealed that consumer awareness of data usage is partial and inconsistent. While 65% of respondents had observed cases where privacy was compromised (Table 7), and 72% believed consent should be prioritized over profits (Table 8), other results showed uncertainty. For example, 43% of respondents disagreed that algorithms affect privacy (Table 9), which indicates gaps in understanding how digital platforms use profiling and personalization technologies.

This contradiction highlights the complexity of digital literacy among audiences. Livingstone (2004) notes that while individuals are increasingly aware of online risks, their comprehension of technical data practices remains limited. The study also found that consumers understood consequences of unethical data use: 56% cited misinformation as a key outcome (Table 10), which supports Ward's (2018) argument that unethical digital journalism undermines democratic discourse.

Thus, while consumers are aware of general risks, they may lack detailed knowledge of how their data is commodified, a gap that could be exploited by media organizations.

Synthesis of Findings with Literature and Theory

The findings broadly align with global concerns about data ethics and journalism. On one hand, respondents emphasized the importance of consent and transparency, supporting the ideals of Social Responsibility Theory which expects the media to uphold democratic accountability. On the other hand, the findings exposed how media ecology, shaped by algorithms and digital competition, introduces hidden ethical challenges that audiences may not fully grasp.

The results also reinforce scholarly arguments that while regulatory frameworks like GDPR have set international standards, many countries (including Nigeria) lack adequate enforcement mechanisms. This allows digital platforms to compromise ethical practices for financial gain, as reflected in respondents' perception that consumer consent is often sidelined.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate a mismatch between consumer expectations and platform practices: while consumers demand transparency and fairness, platforms are perceived as prioritizing revenue generation, sometimes at the expense of trust and ethical obligations.

CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   Summary

This study investigated the ethics of data privacy in journalism with a focus on consumer consent and data usage on digital news platforms. The objectives were to assess the ethical implications of consumer data collection, examine transparency in consent practices, and evaluate the level of consumer awareness about how their information is used.

The major findings can be summarized as follows:

Ethical Implications of Data Collection: respondents agreed that ethical issues are deeply embedded in data collection practices by digital platforms. The results (Tables 11–15) showed that 66% acknowledged the importance of ethics in data practices, and 64% believed ethics ensure fairness and transparency. However, a significant portion of respondents also believed that algorithms could mislead users and that external commercial or political forces influence data use in journalism.

Transparency in Obtaining Consent: the study found that consent practices are often compromised. While 47% of respondents believed respecting consent builds trust and democratic values (Table 12), 64% felt that platforms frequently compromise consent in pursuit of revenue (Table 18). This suggests that consent mechanisms are either unclear, inadequately enforced, or not respected by platforms.

Consumer Awareness of Data Usage: findings revealed partial consumer awareness. While 65% had observed cases of compromised privacy (Table 7), and 72% insisted that consent should be prioritized over profits (Table 8), only 43% recognized that algorithms could affect privacy (Table 9). This shows limited understanding of the deeper technical aspects of digital data usage. Respondents also identified misinformation and loss of trust as consequences of unethical data practices (Table 10).

Theoretical Implications: the findings align with Social Responsibility Theory, which expects the media to uphold democratic values, but they also reveal how commercial pressures undermine these obligations. Similarly, Media Ecology Theory explains how algorithms shape public perception, often in ways consumers do not fully understand.

Overall, the study reveals a mismatch between consumer expectations for ethical journalism and the practices of digital news platforms, which prioritize revenue and engagement over privacy and consent.

5.2   Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that ethical challenges in data privacy remain a significant issue in digital journalism. While consumers are aware of the risks of privacy violations, their knowledge of how data is actually collected and used remains fragmented.

This gap makes it easier for platforms to exploit consumer data without meaningful consent.

Furthermore, the weak enforcement of data protection laws in Nigeria contributes to the unethical use of consumer data by digital media organizations. Unlike global frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe, Nigeria lacks strong regulatory safeguards, leaving consumers vulnerable to exploitation.

The study also concludes that digital platforms often prioritize financial sustainability over ethical responsibility, leading to practices that undermine public trust in journalism. If unchecked, this could further erode the credibility of the media, compromise democratic values, and reduce consumer confidence in news institutions.

5.3   Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

Strengthen Data Protection Regulations:

Government agencies, particularly the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), should enforce stronger policies aligned with global best practices like the GDPR. This will help ensure that consumer consent is clear, informed, and respected.

1. Promote Transparency in Consent Mechanisms: digital news platforms should adopt transparent and user-friendly consent policies. Consent forms should be written in simple language, avoiding legal jargon that confuses consumers. Platforms should also provide options for users to opt out of unnecessary data collection.

2. Enhance Digital Literacy Programs: civil society organizations, media associations, and educational institutions should intensify efforts to improve digital literacy. Training programs should focus on helping consumers understand how their data is collected, used, and monetized, especially regarding algorithms and targeted advertising.

3. Journalistic Self-Regulation and Accountability: media houses should establish internal ethical guidelines for data usage. This includes creating independent ethics committees within news organizations to monitor how consumer data is handled and to ensure that ethical principles are not compromised for commercial gain.

4. Encourage Collaboration with Regulatory Bodies: news platforms should collaborate with regulatory agencies and data protection commissions to develop ethical frameworks that balance commercial interests with consumer rights. Such collaboration will enhance trust between the media and the public.

5. Consumer Advocacy and Awareness: consumers should be encouraged to demand accountability from digital platforms. Advocacy groups should be formed to

monitor and report violations of privacy rights, thereby putting pressure on media organizations to respect ethical standards.

6. Research and Continuous Monitoring: scholars and policymakers should continue to investigate emerging issues in digital journalism, particularly regarding artificial intelligence, big data, and algorithmic personalization, to ensure that ethical practices evolve alongside technological changes.

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KWARA STATE POLYTECHNIC, ILORIN

INSTITUTE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION
QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear respondent,

This survey attempt to research "the ethics of data privacy in journalism a study on consumer consent and data usage in digital news platform." The study is exclusively an academic exercise. I humbly seek your indulgence to assist by filling the following questions as honestly as possible. All information given shall be treated with absolute confidentiality and used for academic purpose only.

Thank you for your cooperation.

SECTION A
Demographic Profile of Respondents

1. Gender: (a) Male [ ] (b) female [ ]
2. Age: (a) 20-29 [ ] (b) 30-39 [ ] (c) 40-49 [ ]
3. Religion: (a) Christian [ ] (b) Muslim [ ] (c) Others [ ]
4. Education: (a) Informal [ ] (b) O'level [ ] (c) ND/NCE [ ] (d) HND/B.sc [ ] (e) M.sc & above [ ]
5. Marital status: (a) Single [ ] (b) Married [ ] (c) Others [ ]

SECTION B

1. How important do you think **data privacy ethics** are in digital news platforms? (a) Very important [ ] (b) Less important [ ] (c) Not important [ ]
2. Have you ever come across a **digital news platform** where consumer data privacy appeared to be compromised? (a) Yes [ ] (b) No [ ]
3. Do you believe that digital news platforms should **prioritize consumer consent and privacy protection** over maximizing audience engagement or revenue generation? (a) Yes [ ] (b) No [ ]
4. Does the use of **advanced technology and data-driven algorithms** affect ethical standards of consumer privacy in journalism? (a) Yes [ ] (b) No [ ]
5. What are the potential consequences of neglecting **data privacy ethics** in digital news platforms? (a) Loss of public trust [ ] (b) Spread of misinformation [ ] (c) Polarization of society [ ] (d) None of the above [ ]

SECTION C

Instruction: *Tick an option in the space boxes provided that best represent your agreement with the statements below*

Keywords: Strongly agree [SA]- Agree[A] – Undecided [U] - Disagree   [D] -Strongly disagree [SD]

S/N	STATEMENTS	OPTIONS				
		SA	A	U	D	SD
1.	Data privacy ethics play a crucial role in ensuring **responsible collection and use of consumer information.**					
2.	Respecting consumer consent is essential for **upholding trust and democratic values** in digital journalism.					
3.	Adhering to data privacy ethics ensures **fair and transparent use of consumer data**, especially in targeted news or advertising.					
4.	Collaborating with external entities, such as **data protection agencies or journalism associations**, strengthens ethical practices in digital news platforms.					
5.	Excessive reliance on **personalized algorithms and data profiling** can distort facts and mislead audiences.					
6.	Upholding data privacy ethics plays a significant role in maintaining the **credibility and reputation of digital news organizations**.					
7.	Journalists and news platforms are often exposed to **commercial and political pressures** that challenge data privacy ethics in digital reporting.					
8.	In some unsafe or competitive environments, digital platforms may **compromise consumer consent** in order to gain traffic or advertising revenue.					
9.	Journalists sometimes prioritize speed and sensationalism over respecting consumer privacy rights.					
10.	Data privacy laws and regulations are necessary to protect consumers from unethical media practices.					