

# Disinformation, ethics and reality: Appraisal of the duties and functions of press secretaries in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Truthful public communication by press secretaries is a sine qua non for good governance and public safety. Thus, ethical codes in both journalism and public relations, the two professions their practitioners mostly serve as press secretaries, are expected to shape their conduct in office. This study sought to find out if these ethical stipulations are adhered to by press secretaries in Nigeria, particularly in the area of disseminating truth, rather than disinformation. The study adopted the survey design. Using a purposive sample of 187 lecturers drawn from five universities in Abuja and its environs, it used a questionnaire as its instrument of data collection. Descriptive statistics were used in the data analysis. The findings showed, among other things, that most of the respondents think press secretaries practise disinformation and put their principals' interests above public interest for economic gain, thereby promoting bad governance and insecurity. The study, therefore, recommended, inter alia, that the NUJ and NIPR should periodically organise training sessions to remind members of their job specifications and ethics and sanction erring members who are press secretaries, rather than giving them awards for walking in the corridors of power.

**Key Words:** Disinformation, Press secretaries, Ethics, Journalism, Public Relations

## Introduction

Public communication is expected to be characterised by truth because most people want to be told the truth (Hänska-Ahy, 2012). Truth itself means agreement with facts and people want to be told the truth because believing and acting on what is false can harm them and even cost them their lives. Thus, parents, schools and religious bodies teach the significance of truth for societal good and survival (Basran, 2019). This basic social paradigm has been mulled over and reinforced by thinkers over the centuries. Socrates (470 BCE – 399 BCE), for instance, who is regarded as an ancient influencer of Public Relations (PR), warned that for public communication to be effective, it ought to be anchored on truth (Meltwater Academy, 2020). Truth as a human value is also hallowed by the *Holy Bible* which forbids lying among Christians and commands them, in both the Old and New Testaments, to speak the truth always so they can be approved of God and be blessed forever (Exodus 20:16, Ephesians 4:25, Revelation 21:8). Similarly, *The Qur'an* teaches truthfulness as a necessity and requirement for every good Muslim who wishes to please Allah and be blessed with eternal reward (*The Qur'an*, 9:119;5:119).

Professionally, many press secretaries, like President Buhari's media aides, Garba Shehu and Femi Adesina, rose to top positions in journalism, serving as editors and in media management positions, before their appointment as media aides. Both men had served as presidents of the Nigerian Guild of Editors in the past. Garba had also served as Managing Director of the *Triumph* newspapers while Adesina was the Managing Director/Editor-in-Chief of *The Sun* newspapers (Otufodunrin, 2015). And journalism is a field where truth is held as sacrosanct and practitioners are charged not to disseminate falsehood (Ohaja, 2014). A former editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, left his footprints on journalism sands of time when he wrote that comments are free, but facts are sacred (*C. P. Scott Quotes*, n.d.). The same reverence for truth is seen in the field of PR where the job of press secretaries primarily lies.

In addition to the aforementioned legacy of past communication masters and the injunctions of sacred books, professional communicators are expected to operate under strict governance by ethical provisions and self-regulation. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have found virtually every communication professional body embracing truth as a principle for its practitioners. For instance, the

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International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Code at No. 7 provides that its members, “Take all reasonable steps to ensure the truth and accuracy of all information provided.” And at No. 8, the code stipulates that they should, “Make every effort to not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information, exercise care to avoid doing so unintentionally and correct any such act promptly” (Consolidated IPRA Code of Conduct, 2011). Similarly, Section 2.2 of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) Code for members requires that they, “Have a positive duty at all times to respect the truth and shall not disseminate false or misleading information knowingly or recklessly and take proper care to check all information prior to its dissemination.” However, the reality seems to be that in Nigeria, these professional Codes of Practice appear to be more honoured in the breach than in the observance as instances in the Literature Review will show.

Historically, the Third Reich of Nazi Germany was built by Adolf Hitler, engaging the brilliance for deception of Dr. Joseph Goebbels as Propaganda Minister (Nilsson, 2018). This hold on power eventually crashed, taking with it over 60 million lives and incalculable material wealth. Similarly, in Nigeria, the civil war between 1967 and 1970 which claimed over three million lives and enormous wealth has been said to have been inflamed by the propaganda warfare between Radio Nigeria, Kaduna and the Enugu-based *Eastern Outlook* newspaper (Chukwuemeka, 2007). This confirms Babatope (1973)’s assertion that the civil war was the eventuality of irresponsible journalism. Thus, this study looks at the problem of disinformation in public communications in Nigeria with respect to how press secretaries do their work and its implications for the country.

### Statement of the Problem

The narrative above has established the value of truthfulness and the destructive nature of lies. PR is concerned with disseminating newsworthy information about the employers of its practitioners through publicity. It is also tasked with image building. In other words, it is concerned with making members of the public to be favourably disposed to individuals, organisations and ideas. This is why public personalities employ press secretaries to keep them in positive light before the public. But the job of image moulding should not be based on lies if the canons of PR and journalism are respected.

Press secretaries in government employment, popularly called media aides to government officials, are paid from public funds. Lying to the citizens, therefore, means that the public is not getting what it is paying the media aides for. This disservice prevents the citizens from knowing the actual state of affairs in government and handicaps them in evaluating the performance of their rulers. It also means that the PR and journalism professions are being discredited by such unethical performance.

This study, therefore, seeks to establish if the duties of press secretaries and the ethical regulations that should guide them in doing their work in Nigeria are widely known, which makes their violations obvious to the public. The study also hopes to ascertain whether its basic assumption that press secretaries in Nigeria lie in the course of their functions is true and find out the implications of such a travesty. The objectives of this study are to:

1. Establish the respondents’ knowledge of the primary duties of a press secretary
2. Determine the respondents’ knowledge of basic ethical regulations in PR
3. Confirm if respondents are of the view that press secretaries in Nigeria lie to the public in the course of performing their functions
4. Ascertain the respondents’ views on the social implications of lies emanating from press secretaries in the course of performing their functions.

### Conceptual Clarifications

**Disinformation:** Disinformation is often used interchangeably with misinformation, but it differs from the latter. Disinformation has been defined as “false information that is given deliberately, especially by government organisations” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2005, p. 438). Misinformation, on the other hand, is the noun form of the verb, “misinform,” which means “to give somebody wrong information about something” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2005, p. 977) and this can be done deliberately or unintentionally. Similarly, Guess and Lyons (2020, p. 10) refer to misinformation as “constituting a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts” and disinformation as “the subset of misinformation that is deliberately propagated ... to deceive.” This study, therefore, uses the term disinformation, which indicates the deliberate spreading of lies or propaganda to deceive, confuse and divert public attention from the truth.

**Duty and Function:** Like misinformation and disinformation, the words, duty and function, seem similar but their definitions differ. While duty is, “That which a person is bound by moral obligation to do, or refrain from doing; that which one ought to do; service morally obligatory,” function is, “the act of executing or performing a duty, office or calling” (What’s the difference between duty and function?, n.d.). The term, duties, is therefore used in this study to refer to the responsibilities of press secretaries (all of which are professionally based on ethics) and the term, functions, as the execution of those responsibilities in reality.

**Ethics:** Ethics is a branch of Philosophy that is concerned with the rights and wrongs of human behaviour or action (Ohaja, 2014). The word, “ethics,” has its root in the Greek word, “ethos,” which means, “customs, habits, culture or code of values by which a people, group, community or society lives” (Nweke, 2001, p. 319). The ethics of PR, therefore, refers to the rules or standards which govern the practice of the profession. PR Ethics is a significant subject because a close study reveals that the charter of the various professional bodies in the field demand a return to or enthronement of those ennobling virtues that identify humanity as a civilised specie. The situation is the same in journalism.

The ethical guidelines of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), for instance, require member practitioners to endeavour to secure the trust of their clients, the public, colleagues and their professional body by basing their performance on truth, honesty, believability, fairness, keeping confidence, mutual respect for the rights and freedom of all concerned, loyalty to client and the public interest (Nkwocha, 2006). Specifically on truth, Section 3 (v) of the NIPR Constitution mandates members to, “Put truth and honesty of purpose before all other considerations” (p. 23). On public interest, the same charter asks that a member should, “Conduct his or her professional activities with proper regard to the Public Interest” (p. 27), while another section demands that a member should take no action “if such action is inconsistent with the public interest” (p. 28) [All citations of the NIPR Code are from Nkwocha, 2006].

In the same vein, the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) Code of Ethics stipulates as follows, inter alia:

The public has a right to know. Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and

the basis of earning public trust and confidence.

A journalist should refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information (Cited in Nwabueze, 2015, p. 419).

**Press Secretary:** The term “press secretary” as it is used in some countries today came into use first in 1940 and designates a person or “someone whose job is to see to the publicity for a film star, theater, company, etc.” (*The New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language*, 1995, p. 792). A more current definition describes a press secretary as “a senior advisor who provides advice on how to deal with the news media and using news management techniques, helps his or her employer to maintain a positive public image and avoid negative media coverage” (Press Secretary, 2009). These translate to this study’s engagement of the title, press secretary, as an official in charge of public communication who, based on his/her media skills, deals with the press or mass media on behalf of an organisation, employer or principal.

In Nigeria, press secretaries go with several designations such as Adviser, Director, Special or Senior Assistant (to a highly-placed functionary) on Media and Publicity. This study used the term restrictively to refer to those of them engaged on the political turf, who communicate on behalf of political office holders. They are often referred to as spokesman/woman, media aide or press secretary, unlike those functioning in corporate Nigeria.

**Reality:** *The New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* (1995) defines reality as the state or quality of being real or of existing in fact. *The Encarta English Dictionary*, as cited in Ohaja (2008, p. 2), breaks the meaning of the term down to the following:

- a. real existence as opposed to imaginary; idealized or false nature
- b. ... everything that actually does or could exist or happen in real life
- c. ... something that has real existence and must be dealt with in real life

Reality in this study is, therefore, used in the sense of what ethical stipulations are observed by press secretaries in Nigeria or not at the time of the study, as compared to what the various codes of conduct in journalism and PR cited so far demand.

### Literature Review

A September 2021 article in the *Journal of Public Affairs* reports a study by two researchers

conducted to identify the roles of press secretaries. Through interviews with 11 former and present Swedish press secretaries, text analysis of data from ministers' and press secretaries' Twitter timelines and perusing of memoirs from ex-press secretaries, the study found their roles to include the following:

- Preparing statements and talking points for their principals and co-ordinating communications in the media to maximise attention to issues the government wants to promote
- Co-ordinating with other communications staff to present a unified front
- Reacting to events and issues as they occur
- Sending out many stories, including scoops, to proactively determine the narrative on issues
- Acting as spokespersons for their principals, signing and releasing statements, addressing the press and fielding questions
- Serving as gatekeepers for and protecting their principals: That means serving as a filter for information their principals receive, sorting through journalists' requests for information to decide which to honour and which to prioritise. It also means deciding information to release and which to suppress.
- Advising their principals on what to say; when, how and why they should say or avoid saying certain things
- Cultivating and maintaining relationships to spread their message, especially with journalists
- Building an appropriate media strategy with as many platforms and services as possible on both the traditional and new media
- Managing their principals' official social media pages
- Maintaining a robust presence on social media via their own official pages (Johansson & Johansson, 2021).

The integrity with which press secretaries perform the aforementioned duties matters a lot. In her study on the training requirements for the next generation of PR practitioners, Ohaja (2011, p. 57) traces the evolution of PR and observes that in its early days, it was often used to:

limit the disastrous consequences of the client's policies, statements and actions. That is to say, it was largely employed on an ad-hoc basis to manage crisis. PR tactics in such cases consisted of denial of

responsibility for wrongdoing, telling half-truths and outright lies, usually by a representative and not by the personality in the centre of the storm.

She, however, asserts that PR has "moved from being self-serving to recognizing the public interest and insisting that organizations conform to it" (Ohaja, 2011, p. 57). In other words, the current conception of PR is that "rather than being outrageous and manipulative," seeking to deceive the public, it "should concern itself with doing good and taking credit for it to create goodwill" (p. 58). Citing several scholars, Ohaja (2011) reiterates that in this new era, "transparency and trust" (Hayes, 2008, p. 22) have become indispensable, instead of "news manipulation, cover-up (and) sugar-coating" (Center & Jackson, 2008, p. 364), that PR was previously associated with.

An instance of press secretaries in Nigeria performing their duties in the breach can be seen in a review of the book, *The Work of A Press Secretary*, authored by the former press attaché to the German Embassy in Nigeria, Dr. Burkard Weth. The review complains that:

The position of press secretary gives the office holder an opportunity to build bridges that connect their principals to the public. That is not often the case with most Nigerian press secretaries though. Some are aloof, arrogant or ignorant of the crucial role their position holds for their principals. Many press secretaries hardly pick up the phone to speak for, or manage the image of their principals. They often prefer to deal only with a preferred cohort of insiders (Etemiku, 2021).

The practice of insulating leaders from the governed seems to be common among Nigerian press secretaries. But it is against the public interest because it prevents the leaders from feeling the pulse of the people and shields the leaders from public scrutiny which is necessary for good governance. This was the case when President Buhari was ill and flown abroad during his first tenure. Nigerians were so starved of information about his whereabouts and wellbeing that some began to speculate that he was dead and that a body double had been found to take his place (Campbell, 2017; Stanley-Becker, 2018).

It is also reminiscent of what transpired during the last but one administration of the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua. In his tell-all book written

after his time in office, Yar'Adua's spokesman revealed the elaborate cover-ups he and other close associates of the president used to suppress information about his extremely poor health from November 2009 to May 5, 2010 when his death was finally announced officially (Adeniyi, 2011). This included news blackouts on the president's several trips for surgeries abroad while he battled his ailment.

The aforementioned violations of press secretaries' basic role of enabling truthful two-way communications between their principals and the public may have contributed to their being often described as spin doctors as the memoir of former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher's chief press secretary, Bernard Ingham, *The wages of spin: A clear case of communications gone wrong*, shows (Ingham, 2003). In the same vein, a study of congressional press secretaries in the United States that collected its data through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and a survey described them as hacks, flacks and spin doctors who were practising more of press agency than modern PR (Downes, 1998). Press agency, Lattimore *et al.* (2004) explain, is the use of "information as a manipulative tool, employing whatever means are available to achieve desired public opinion and action" (p. G-5).

Another study that also focused on the "activities of the corps of political press officers now invariably known as spin doctors," (Gaber, 1999, p. 264) examined how government communications were run under the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair in Britain. The study found that the press secretaries then were so many, unlike what Britain was used to. They dominated the news cycle and controlled the news agenda with all manner of methods which Gaber classified as:

**Above the line spin** – conventional activities of press secretaries, which included the following:

- Issuing a statement on a planned government activity or policy: This came in the form of press releases or press briefings.
- Reacting to activities or speeches coming from the opposition or other news events: This involved constant rebuttals quickly made to opposition claims to journalists covering government beats and through interviews in the media.
- Publicising the speeches and interviews of government officials and planting stories or articles in the media.

**Below the line spin**, on the other hand, is more covert and often uses questionable means to push communications efforts. Some of its methods include:

- Pre-empting formal announcements by government officials by offering glimpses into what they want to say to prepare journalists to support it
- Setting and driving the news agenda: This means determining what information is released and when and ensuring that what the government wants dominates the news cycle. This was done by offering scoops to notable journalists and releasing related stories that kept the public engaged on the target issue.
- Firebreaking: "A firebreak is a deliberately constructed diversion to take journalists off the scent of an embarrassing story" (p. 269). This was done through springing events that upstaged the damning story or by leaking information the media would consider newsworthy enough to pursue, thus distracting them from the embarrassing story.
- Stoking the fire: This is the opposite of firebreaking. It means doing whatever is possible to keep bad news about the opposition on the news agenda. A smear campaign can be launched and a stream of accusers continue to appear to deepen the hole dug for the opponent.
- Kiteflying: This involves using the media to test public reaction to a proposal. A confidential tip is given to some journalists, which is confirmed if the plan is welcomed by the public but denied if there is a backlash.
- Throwing out the bodies: This involves releasing bad news that could damage the government when the public is busy with something exciting so that most people miss the bad news.
- Laundering: This means releasing good and bad news simultaneously so that the good will mitigate the damage done by the bad.
- Creating a band of favoured journalists that are loyal to the government and protect its interests
- Bullying and intimidating other journalists outside the favoured group: Insulting them, banning them from the government office, threatening them with arrest (Gaber, 1999).

The present study seeks to ascertain how press secretaries in Nigeria are doing their jobs. Are they performing as press agents and spin doctors or are they serving as honest brokers of information with high regard for public interest as the ethics of PR and journalism demand?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, the tenets of which deem lying to the public through the mass media an ethical affront. This theory was put forward by F. S. Siebert, T. B. Paterson and W. Schramm in 1956 based on the experience of the press in America in the preceding decade. Press excesses which emphasised profit and lewd fare over social sustenance until 1942 had led to concern and backlash from the public. As a result, a commission on press freedom was constituted with Sir Robert Hutchins as its head to examine how the press performed its duties and advise on adjustments it needed to make. The commission's report released in 1947 underscored the primacy of society without which journalism would not exist. It, therefore, recommended that mass media practitioners acknowledge, develop and, in practice, exhibit the highest sense of social responsibility and professionalism in their reportage (Asemah, 2011). By themselves, the practitioners were to fashion out ethical rules and regulations to guide their trade with social sustenance at the centre stage. To enable them perform as required, media practitioners were to be protected from government or external interference except through the judiciary and for the good of society.

Press secretaries, most of them veteran journalists, are privy to and bound by the pro-society tenets of the social responsibility model of mass media roles. This places the onus on press secretaries to furnish journalists through whom they plant stories in the media with the truth as required by ethics. Disinformation, lying and misleading the public violate the social responsibility imperative of public communication hence the relevance of the theory to this study.

### **Method of Study**

This study used the survey research design. As such, a questionnaire served as the instrument for data collection. The population of the study was 294. This is the total number of academics that possess PhD and/or Master's degrees in selected departments of five universities in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, and its

environs. The selected departments and universities are: Political Science, Economics, Sociology and Law (University of Abuja, often shortened to UniAbuja); Political Science, Mass Communication, Economics, Sociology and Law (Baze University); Political Science, Economics and Sociology (Bingham University); Arts and Social Science Education, Educational Foundations, and Marketing and Advertising (Veritas University); Political Science, Mass Communication, Economics, Sociology and Law (Nasarawa State University, NSU) – altogether twenty (20) departments from five (5) universities.

Two sampling techniques were used for the study – purposive and available. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique through which a researcher chooses sample elements with characteristics that are best suited for his/her study (Ohaja, 2003). The elements thus chosen were the 5 universities, the 20 departments and academics therein. These departments were chosen because lecturers there likely need media currency to be efficient in their jobs. As researchers themselves, academics have a penchant for empiricism and a high regard for research results and the sanctity of data. They were, therefore, expected to fill the instrument carefully and sincerely. In addition, the general public may not possess the necessary media literacy and knowledge to give valid responses to the questions raised. Moreover, the researchers believe that academics in the FCT and nearby universities are sufficient to capture demographic and psychographic diversities where necessary in the sample.

The census method was used in designating the entire population of academics in the chosen departments (294) as the sample because it was a manageable figure that did not need further reduction for a study of this nature. Availability sampling technique was finally used to reach the respondents due to the high mobility of academics. After four months of intense leg work (March – June 2021), only 187 academics were accessed. This number, which amounted to 64% response rate, was used for the data analysis because it is higher than Kiess and Bloomquist (1985) that had a response rate of 60%; Babbie (1990, 1998), recorded 50% and 38.9. Also, response rates of 40% and 42% were variously reported as acceptable on the American Psychological Association (APA) website (All cited in Keller, 2019).

The questionnaire had 14 items, most of which were structured in a 4-point Likert scale. One of the researchers administered the instrument

with the help of a research assistant and, in some cases, the secretaries in the selected departments.

**Results**

The sample for the study consisted of 64 (34%) lecturers from UniAbuja, 56 (30%) from Baze, 29 (16%) from NSU, 25 (13%) from Veritas and 13 (7%) from Bingham. Eighty-eight (47%) of them had Master’s degrees while the rest also had PhD degrees. Sixty-seven (36%) spent two hours daily on the media, 69 (37%) spent three hours daily, while 51 (27%) spent four or more hours daily on the media.

To address the first objective of the study, which is to establish the respondents' knowledge of the duties of press secretaries, item No. 6 in the questionnaire was used. It listed six options out of which only one was not the duty of a press secretary and respondents were asked to identify that wrong option. Of the 187 respondents, 136 (73%) were able to identify the wrong option(D) which read as follows: “To represent the government or the corporation in the court of law as advocate.” That means that the majority of the respondents recognised the other options (listed below) as the duties of press secretaries.

- A. To seek favourable publicity for their employer in the news.
- B. To create and nurture two-way communications between their employer and the public
- C. To secure public understanding and acceptance of their principals
- E. To correct public misconceptions or rumours about their employers using the truth

- F. To develop and operate a corporate social responsibility programme on behalf of their employer

The second objective of the study was to determine the respondents' knowledge of the basic ethical regulations in PR which press secretaries should abide by and it was addressed by item No. 7 in the questionnaire. As with the first objective, the respondents were asked to identify the wrong option in a list of six options. The majority (127 or 68%) of the respondents picked the wrong option (C): “The end justifies the means as long as the audience believe his or her story.” So again, most of the respondents knew that the other options (listed below) are part of PR ethics that should guide press secretaries in their work.

- A To secure the trust of clients, publics, professional bodies and colleagues
- B. To never tell a lie or fail to own up to a wrong even if it hurts temporarily
- D. To be loyal to their employer, yet uphold public interest over private interests
- E. To be fair, honest and above board in conduct and behaviour
- F. To keep the confidence of and respect the rights and freedoms of others

The third objective was to find out if respondents were of the view that press secretaries in Nigeria lie to the public while carrying out their functions and the answers as got from items 8-12 in the questionnaire are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Reponses on whether press secretaries in Nigeria lie to the public

Statements showing whether press secs. in Nig. lie to the public	SA		A		D		SD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
8. Press secs. in Nigeria could get sacked for revealing embarrassing information about their employers.	61	33	88	47	25	13	13	7
9. Fear of unemployment and resulting lack of remuneration affect the telling of truth by press secs. in Nig.	46	25	75	40	51	27	15	8

10. Press secs. in Nig. uphold the public interest over the private interest of their employers where there is a clash.	179	35	19	78	42	57	30	
11. Rather than lying to the public, press secs. in Nig. resign their appointments honourably.	24	13	22	12	69	37	72	38
12. Press secs. in Nig. lie to their audience in order to save their orgns. /principals and for material gain.	92	49	81	44	6	3	8	4

SA – Strongly Agree, A – Agree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

As Table 1 shows, most of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that press secretaries in Nigeria lie to their audience to save their organisations/principals and for material gain. The majority of the respondents also opined that press secretaries in Nigeria could be sacked for telling the truth and fear of unemployment affects their telling the truth. On the other hand, most of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed that press secretaries in Nigeria uphold public interest

over their employers' private interests and that rather than lying, they resign their positions honourably.

The fourth objective of the study was to ascertain the respondents' views on the social implications of lies emanating from press secretaries. Items 13 and 14 in the questionnaire were used to address that objective. They were 4-point Likert scale items like Nos. 8-12 and the responses are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Responses on social implications of lies emanating from press secs.

Social implications of lying by press secs.	SA		A		D		SD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
13. Lying or disinformation by press secs. affects the polity negatively.	100	54	79	42	6	3	2	1
14. A society anchored on propaganda is unsafe.	91	49	88	47	4	2	4	2

As the data on Table 2 show, the majority of the respondents affirmed that lying by press secretaries negatively affects the polity and a society anchored on propaganda is unsafe.

**Discussion**

The results for the first objective show that the respondents, and by implication the public, know

the duties of press secretaries. They affirmed that press secretaries are expected to protect the image of their principals but that this should be based on truth. They also indicated that they should develop two-way communications between their principals and the public. These duties are among the duties of press secretaries identified by Johansson and Johansson (2021) and in the book, *The Work of A*



*Press Secretary*, written by a seasoned practitioner, Dr. Burkard Weth (Cited in Etemiku, 2021).

Since the respondents know the duties of press secretaries, it follows that they can identify whether these duties are being carried out by press secretaries in Nigeria or not. It can also be inferred from this finding that press secretaries know what their duties should be and the proper way these duties should be carried out since they are usually seasoned professionals who are more knowledgeable of their field than the respondents who exhibited familiarity with their duties in this study.

On the issue of the ethical guidelines in PR which press secretaries should adhere to in carrying out their duties, the respondents were also overwhelmingly aware of them. These ethics emphasise truthfulness and the upholding of public interest. They reflect the principles enshrined in both PR and journalism codes of ethics cited in the Literature Review. They are also in line with the tenets of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press which the press secretaries, who spent the bulk of their careers in journalism, are familiar with. Even new entrants into the fields of PR and journalism are familiar with the premium placed on truth and public interest and the abhorrence of disinformation as a means of protecting a reputation their principals have not earned and maintaining their hold on power when they have failed the public.

The results for the third objective show that the majority of the respondents feel that press secretaries in Nigeria lie to the public in the course of carrying out their functions as Utomi (2019) stated and that they are often pressured to do so by their employers due to the threats of dismissal hanging over their jobs and the fear of the financial fallout therefrom. Most of the respondents also disagreed that press secretaries in Nigeria would rather resign than compromise their jobs' ethical standards. Nigerian press secretaries, therefore, fit the description of spin doctors given by Downes (1998), Gaber (1999) and Ingham (2003). They engage in manipulation and distortion of information in line with what Downes (1998) labelled press agency and Gaber (1999) called below the line spin. The suppression of information concerning Presidents Yar'Adua's and Buhari's health reported by Adeniyi (2011), Campbell (2017) and Stanley-Becker (2018) are prime examples. So are the incidents of lying by President Buhari's media aides and the numerous accusations of distortion of facts and propaganda leveled against the federal government's

mouthpiece, the Information Minister (Adebulu, 2019; Uche, 2018; Adebayo, 2019; Top 50 lies of lying Mohammed- Study Report, 2017; Ugbodaga, 2020).

With respect to the fourth objective on the implications of lying by press secretaries, the respondents mostly agreed that it affects the polity negatively and makes society unsafe. When people mistrust government spokespersons due to habitual lying, rumours prevail and people are likely to take the laws into their hands. The state of insecurity in Nigeria has worsened under the Buhari administration and agitations for secession, state police and vigilantism have grown because the citizens do not believe the government is sincerely tackling the issues of terrorism, kidnapping and banditry, but coddling the perpetrators while crushing agitators (Akinkuotu, 2019). This comes in part from the arrogant, high-handed messaging from the president's media aides, the insulation of the president from the public due to lack of regular media interaction and lack of accountability for dishonesty by public officers and their press secretaries (Utomi, 2019; Etemiku, 2021). Babatope (1973) and Chukwuemeka (2007)'s reminders of how recklessness in political communication helped to plunge Nigeria into civil war in the past should be enough warning to today's crop of press secretaries, not only with regard to deception in their messaging but their confrontational and autocratic tone in sending out messages and feedbacks to the press and the public. This is contrary to the dictates of the Social Responsibility Theory which demands that the press and all contributors thereto should work for societal stability and progress and not create upheaval for parochial and financial interests.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study have shown that press secretaries in Nigeria do not live up to the ethical expectations of their jobs. Rather than keep the public properly informed of the activities and intentions of government, they suppress information and allow rumours to hold sway. They also put the interests of their principals above the public interest and whitewash their misdeeds in the public eye. Apparently, this sort of misbehaviour is also noticeable among political press secretaries in other countries like Britain and the United States as Ingham (2003), Gaber (1999) and Downes (1998) show. It appears that politicians universally put misleading the public to further their own interests higher than working for the public good and their press secretaries help them to accomplish this.

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