



ISSN 2160-6579

JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION

Volume 2, Number 4, April 2012



David Publishing Company
www.davidpublishing.com

The Nigerian Press, Brown Envelope Syndrome (BES) and Media Professionalism: The Missing Link

Nnamdi T. Ekeanyanwu, Nkechi Obianigwe
Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria

Brown envelop syndrome (BES) has remained a controversial issue in any debate centred on the Nigerian press, media professionalism and media ethics. It is one of the major setbacks of media growth in Nigeria. BES is a system whereby journalists collect money or other material gifts from news sources, company executives or event organizers to cover such events and probably give it the wildest publicity as the case may be. It symbolizes the rot that has plagued the Nigerian media industry since the early 1980s to date. This paper therefore builds from an empirical study by the same authors, as well as literature materials to argue that media professionalism and the enforcement of the various ethical codes that preach professionalism are the practical ways to ensure ethical conduct and behaviour amongst journalists and other categories of media practitioners, especially in Nigeria where these are missing. This, according to the paper, is the missing link in the quest to rid the media industry in Nigeria from the monster called BES.

Keywords: brown envelop syndrome (BES), media ethics, media professionalism, ethical codes, journalists, Nigerian press/media

Introduction

As important as information and technological resources are to media organisations, so are human resources. Human resource is an important element that forms the crux of the subject matter of brown envelope syndrome (BES). This is very important to our understanding of the major issues that have cropped up in the controversy surrounding where the media syndrome called brown envelope in the Nigerian media context comes from. BES is a result of the gap in human ethical reasoning. It is also a reflection of the moral decadence in the general system called Nigeria. In this regard, we must not see BES as just another media coinage or concept but a problem that arises in the first place because of institutional challenges in the management of peoples' collective resources, human capital deficiency, and misplaced/misappropriated priorities. These are the core issues this paper hopes to address.

The place of the media in building the Nigerian state cannot be overemphasized. Both in the nation's military experiment and her chequered experience towards democratization, Nigerian journalists have taken the position of war lords to ensure that the rights of the citizens are not trampled upon. This informs the statement made by a famous journalist and former Lagos State Governor, His Excellency, Alhaji Lateef Jakande, that the battle for Nigerian independence was fought and won on the pages of newspapers.

Nnamdi T. Ekeanyanwu, Ph.D., Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University.

Nkechi Obianigwe, B.SC. (Summa Cum Laude), Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University.

According to Joseph Pulitzer as cited by Charles (1999), the journalist "is there to watch over the safety and welfare of the people who trust him" (p. 225). In the Nigerian perspective, the media, to put it succinctly, have done well in pursuing this noble goal. It is therefore no longer debatable that the media are largely responsible for the actualization of Nigerian's independence, curbing of neo-colonial excesses and the propagation of the ideals of a modern nation-state. According to Oseni (1999), the media have been consistent in exposing corrupt and inept leadership, socio-political perfidy and primitive dictatorship. In as much as workers of all sorts are required to perform; financial objectives predominate and there seems to be little scope for ethics, irrespective of the worker's own personal motives and desires.

Journalism is an industry, a major player in the profit-seeking market economy while journalists are merely workers in that industry, driven by the need to make a living. In another perspective, journalism is a profession, a vocation founded on ethical principles which direct and regulate the conduct of the practitioner. In such an industry, media workers are like any others. They are concerned about getting jobs, job security, working conditions, future prospects, and personal satisfaction. These are predisposing factors that could constitute a reason to engage in BES or other forms of compromise.

Nigerian journalists are members of the society with basic needs and challenges. Some of these needs include the need for security, comfort, and the need to build self-esteem. They also face challenges which are both political and largely economical. In essence, the average Nigerian journalist is struggling to meet his/her or basic needs in an extended family structure with its gargantuan demands on his/her lean wages. The journalist is also struggling to balance the numerous contending political forces and avoid being the battle ground in a game of deceit he/she does not understand. Nevertheless, these challenges should not be a basis for the journalist not to take his/her responsibility to the public unserious.

Adewale (2008), in his "The Rot in Nigerian Journalism Is Much Deeper Than We Thought" cited a controversial statement by Graham Greene to back up his position thus: "A petty reason perhaps why novelists more and more try to keep a distance from journalists is that novelists are trying to write the truth and journalists are trying to write fiction" (<http://www.ngex.com/news/public/article.php?ArticleID=961>). This embarrassing irony aptly describes the state of Nigerian journalism and journalists in particular.

From previous researches, it has been discovered that the age old trust in Nigerian journalism has been seriously eroded. Adewale (2008) explained this fact especially in the clumsy relationship between the former national soccer coach of Nigeria, Shaibu Amodu and the Vanguard sports editor and columnist, Onochie Anibeze. According to him, "the relationship was such that Amodu once asked one of his players to disembark from the team bus so he could accommodate Mr. Anibeze. The reward for Mr. Amodu is unquantifiable and these symbiotic relationships have worked well for this journalist at the expense of their profession and the Nigerian masses". Adewale (2008) further noted that the situation is such that we now have journalists who cover a minister for a year or two, only to report nothing but glowing attributes about that minister and the ministry under him. In the end, the public is isolated from the true picture of happenings in such a ministry (<http://www.ngex.com/news/public/article.php?ArticleID=961>). The only benefactor is usually the journalist who goes home with all forms of brown envelopes, junkets, free trips and etc. to the detriment of media professionalism and ethical standards.

Media Ethics and BES in Nigeria

In our everyday lives, we are faced with the problems of right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice.

Man, being a rational being, has the ability to choose between good and evil, right and wrong, and the fact that he is a social being entails that he does not exist in isolation but in a society. He is, therefore, faced with various challenges that are peculiar to the society and is compelled to interact with other social beings in the same society. This interaction makes him find fulfilment and solidarity with his fellow men, which makes a person act morally or ethically only when he relates himself in principle to all mankind (Akabogu, 2005).

Ethics is an integral part of human existence that is primarily concerned with the personal duties of an individual to himself and to others. It also forms the major crux of this paper. Ethics is a branch of philosophy which deals with judgement as to the rightness or wrongness, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval, or acceptability or the unacceptability of our actions and deeds. Ethics can also be defined as a normative science of conduct which is concerned with the right or moral or acceptable thing to do per time in a given space. In media practice, ethics aims at regulating the behaviour of journalists and guarding against the abuses of their power as gatekeepers and watchdogs in a complex societal arrangement. Media ethics therefore remains a core constituent of media professionalism. In other words, we cannot talk about media professionalism without major reference to media ethics.

In fact, the journalist as a member of the society is expected to maintain some ethical codes of conduct as he discharges his duty or responsibility of informing the members of the public objectively and accurately. Furthermore, Ngwodo (2008) made it clear that to obtain truth, these ethical codes of conduct must be observed with utmost commitment and when these codes are violated, the actions taken are seen as unethical. However, in the Nigerian situation, all sorts of ethical issues or problems abound which may include materialism, bribery, corruption, embezzlement, fraud, sycophancy, and all kinds of professional indiscipline and misconduct. Of all these ethical problems, the issue of materialism, which is manifested in the form of bribery and acceptance of gifts popularly called "brown envelope", is rife and therefore demands scholarly attention so as to call the situation to order. This nomenclature is derived from the underworld business of wrapping of wares in brown envelopes.

It is no longer news that the BES has become an albatross for the 21st century Nigerian journalist. It has been criticized by scholars in the field of mass communication who describe it as a form of inducing writers and editors with financial gratification to influence their writings in favour of the givers. As we have discussed earlier, the journalist owes its credibility to the public since they are seen as the "voice" and "ear" of the people. But when the journalist performs his/her duties in the interest of a select few for personal gains, it is regarded as irresponsible and thus the credibility of the profession becomes doubtful (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2010).

BES has become so common that a journalist might accept it without knowing that he/she has actually accepted a bribe that can make him/her compromise journalistic principles or expected ethical standards. A reporter of *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia, Hermawan (2006) gave the analysis of findings which clearly illustrated that most journalists were unsure of when they had received a bribe thus:

Even though the journalistic code of ethics clearly prohibits reporters from accepting bribes, they are still divided on what constitutes a bribe. A recent survey by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AIJ) shows that 85% of 400 journalists surveyed in 17 cities believed that accepting money from news sources was a form of bribery, but only 65% agreed that receiving valuable goods, such as cell phones and cameras was bribery. 33% of the respondents believed that having their travel expenses covered by a news source was a form of bribery, while 65% said it was not. 36% of journalists thought that hotel accommodation provided by news sources was bribery. Many of them have an erroneous perception of bribery. They think bribery only occurs when a source deposits money into their bank account. (<http://www.asiamedia.com>)

These monetary gifts could pressurize the journalist into doing what the giver wants, and this makes the journalist unable to be objective in his reporting of events and issues involving the people who give such gifts. Thus, the news stories produced are likened to commercial products that have been paid for by the customer which should serve the need to which the product is expected, in favour of the customer. The average Nigerian journalist sees BES as normal and so not ashamed to ask for the money openly. An instance of this was the case of the Rt. Reverend Abiodun Adetiloye, retired Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria, who was sighted at Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos. Journalists crowded him, asking for an interview on issues of national importance. The man of God spoke at length. His views were newsworthy. But the journalists felt they needed something more to write the news. They asked for “transport money” when the religious man declined; the journalists blacked out the entire interview (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2010).

The subject of BES is usually discussed under Envelope Journalism (also called “Red Envelope Journalism”, “White Envelope Journalism”, “Ch’ongi”, and “Wartawan Amplop”), which are colloquial terms for the practice of bribing journalists for favourable media coverage. In other words, it could be called red envelope or white envelope syndrome depending on how it is regarded in a particular country or the normal envelope used to wrap the monetary gifts. However, the term “brown” envelope is relative to the Nigerian press and could also be adopted as such in any other country.

The term seems to be most commonly used in several countries like Asia—the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Indonesia. It arose from the envelopes used to hold cash bribes, given ostensibly as tokens of appreciation for attending a press conference. More recently, the term Automated Teller Machine (ATM) journalism has arisen, to indicate the change to electronic transfer of bribes to journalists’ bank accounts (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/> cited in Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2010).

Although it was hard to say when this syndrome became rampant in the media, literature, however, suggested that it became a topical issue when the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in Nigeria brought about news commercialization. It has been reviewed from past researches that corruption has been institutionalised in the press with BES. In the long run (especially in political processes), it becomes very difficult to correct or criticize leaders that emerge through such dubious processes particularly by the press that throws them up in the first instance. Easterman (2003) explained the influence of politicians with regard to this syndrome thus:

In political processes, the journalists themselves are seen as barriers to free and fair reporting. In 2003, a Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) state chairman, Alhaji Makama Rigachikum once regarded the Nigerian journalists as corrupt, but he demonstrated how politicians like him made journalists corrupt. After a press conference, he offered a gift of 50, 000 Naira to journalists; although very generous, yet unethical. But in Nigeria, it is a routine exercise as politicians pay what is called “dash” in brown envelopes to make sure they get favourable coverage. (p. 23)

This development is clearly against the social responsibility theory of the mass media, which would be discussed in details in the course of this paper. Simply put, the notion of the social responsibilities of the mass media means that the mass media act as the conscience of the nation by revealing bad things, commending good ones and keeping the interest of the citizenry uppermost in their agenda.

Overview of Literature on BES, Ethics, and Professionalism

The issue of brown envelope cannot be discussed in isolation if we consider the term as a sort of financial gratification which is related to the term “news commercialization”. The United Nations Educational, Scientific,

and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1980), as cited in Omenugha and Oji (2007), noted that “News has become a commercial product ... Important developments in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant, even trivial news items, concerning urban events and the activities of personalities”(p. 14). In Nigerian media scene, news is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events, it is now about packaged broadcast or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties, thereby giving room for individuals, communities, private and public organizations, local governments, state governments and ministries to gain access to the media during news time for a prescribed fee. The message they wish to put across is then couched in the formal features of news and is passed on to the unsuspecting public as such (Omenugha & Oji, 2007, pp. 13-16).

According to Omenugha and Oji (2007), commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as a result of SAP introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned media houses. According to Okunna (2003), “The trend nowadays is that even public media which are run with public funds are not immune to commercial competition. In broadcasting, for instance there is the widespread manifestation of the punishment syndrome in government owned broadcast organisations” (p.78). Okunna (2003) further explains that in punishment syndrome, governments clearly exert financial and administrative pressures on public service broadcasters to be more cost-efficient and self-sufficient in financing their day-to-day operations. They are also encouraged to develop their own sources of revenue by entering the market.

With the increasing rise in production cost and dwindling circulation, the media houses resort to all kinds of tricks to make money. The situation has led to a lot of compromise with “sensationalization” of news stories and half truths reaching an alarming stage. However, just as the media organisations were subjected to economic pressure and tried all means not to sink, so were individual journalists. The greatest problem that besets Nigerian journalists is that of poverty (which is still a persistent problem); which scholars agree need to be addressed if the ethical and professional standards are to be maintained (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2010).

Rather than do so, however, the current practices in most media organisations in Nigeria seem to be encouraging unethical practices. Publishers in Nigeria, rather than pay attractive wages to the journalists, refer to their identity cards as meal tickets. In other words, the journalists are encouraged to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thus encouraging the popular BES within journalism parlance in Nigeria (Omenugha & Oji, 2007). Most times journalists are often invited by the high and mighty in the society to “their” (slated) events. In many cases, the journalists are so well-taken care of and they go home with the so-called “news” often written by the people who invited them.

Increasingly, commercial-oriented news stories are gradually taking the place of hard news reports. It is important therefore that reporters and editors should concern themselves with quality news coverage and reportage than making unholy profits. News commercialization has affected information flow tremendously. As the majority of news is paid for, therefore, the news that sees the light of the day has to be induced by somebody or an organization, while news stories that are genuine and authoritative are dropped because there is no inducement where such news stories emanate from (Hanson, 2005, p. 140).

Nevertheless, a difference exists when there is a legitimate sale of air time for paid messages adjacent to or within news breaks and when broadcast and print media stations charge news sources for the privilege of covering and relaying their pre-paid views or messages as news. In the latter case, articles that do not emanate from the organisation like review materials from external sources, are paid for else, such articles are shoved aside. When this is the case, the media is seen as selling cheaply the integrity of its newscast by attesting to the “truth” of the claims of the so-called sponsor. This then leads to news distortion as the person who pays the

piper often calls the tune. Since the media would not like to lose a major customer, they will do all within their reach to satisfy such client that pays them enough money to have his/her view projected. In return, the client may dictate how and what he/she wants out of the news packaging of the media house. This can extend to dictate to the media what making the news, thereby emasculating opposing views. In whatever way, the issue of news commercialization as seen, makes the news susceptible to abuse by interest groups who can pay their way into the media to project an idea they want people to accept.

The dwindling image of Nigeria's press as a result of BES is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Okunna (2003) clearly established the fact that "only a disciplined press can make meaningful contribution to national development" (p. 258). The implications of a non-disciplined press might not be immediate, but the end would always justify the means. In the same vein, the Rector of Times Journalism Institute, Ndubisi Ugbede, cited in Umejie (2008), stated "A journalist that peddles lies (or is not objective) will sooner or later die; it may not be physical death. The profession has a way of forgetting those who cannot stand to the ethics of the profession" (<http://www.independentngonline.com/>).

However, some media professionals do not even see this act as being unethical or as a corrupt practice. To them, the issue is more of survival than corruption. Okoye (2007, p. 22) cited an interview with a veteran journalist, Abiodun Adeniyi, who is of the opinion that brown envelopes that are voluntarily given should not be seen as bribe. This act of freewill, according to him, is evident in other professions. He continues thus:

Our job is no different from that of lawyers and doctors and so should enjoy the same welfare package they are entitled to. If journalists are not allowed to take brown envelope, then media proprietors should come out with good conditions of service. The temptation might sometimes be too great to resist if they remember that what awaits them at the end of the month is nothing to write home about (p. 22).

Danladi (2008, p. 2) was of the view that Nigerian journalists were the most poorly paid in terms of their total welfare package. According to him(2008), "Some earn as little as N15, 000 (Less than a \$100) a month... The journalists have found themselves in a difficult situation of balancing the demands of their survival and that of protecting the interest of the society in which they live, vis-à-vis adhering to professional ethics". He is also of the view that poor remunerations, which give rise to BES and undermine the achievements of the Nigerian journalists. Zaggi (2007) supported this view thus:

It is shocking to know that some media organizations in Nigeria pay meagre, irregular or sometimes no salaries at all to journalists working for them. They only tell the journalists to use the name and reputation of the medium to earn a living for themselves. This of course is a fertile ground that breeds bribery and corruption into the profession. The worker deserves his wages to meet his/her needs. To deny him the fruit of his labour is to say the least callous. Denied good and regular salaries, these journalists are forced to depend on gratification and bribery for survival. This practice however has given rise to the concept of "cheque book journalism", which has today become widespread in the country under different names. Some call it "brown envelop", others call it "qua", while others have christened it as "egunje". (p. 2)

It is clear that this breeds distorted reports and if the journalists must reports truth, Zaggi (2007) points out that the journalist should be well paid to enable him to have the courage to resist all forms of temptations and to report only the truth without allowing anything to influence his news judgment. Some journalists even receive same amount with their salaries as bribes or even more than their salaries, how then can they remain truthful to the profession that places little or no financial value on them?

It is interesting to see the wide income gap between reporters and their editorial bosses. Some reporters earn as little as 50,000 Naira a month, and many of them are M.A.Degree holders. While apart from getting money from politicians who want favourable reports, the editors have all the perks enjoyed by their

counterparts in say the banking sector. Of course, this means that overtime those who are good and really interested in journalism are discouraged from pursuing careers in journalism simply because they cannot get income from the sector and those who stay resort to accepting brown envelopes just to survive (Onyisi, 1996).

It is in this guise that Umejie (n. d.) in his study "Brown Envelope Syndrome and Salad Journalism" emphasized the fact that Nigerian journalism "is not built on but has thrived nowadays on a culture of bribery and corruption. Then, the pen was mightier than the sword, but now the pen has become powerless and useless because of Naira chase and our journalists have turned lily-livered"(p. 24).

While giving an insight into the history of gratification in Nigerian journalism, emphasis was laid on the fact that the acceptance of gifts by journalists from news sources could be said to be as old as Nigerian journalism and consequently a global phenomenon (Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2010). However, it was established that in the journalists' relation with society, they face ethical squabbles which thus explain the fact that the basic problem of journalism mainly has been ethical. The issue of conflict of interest is clearly spelt out and explained. Here, it is seen as a clash between professional loyalties and external interest that undermines the credibility of the moral agent, while also drawing attention to the fact that the journalists' primary responsibility is to their readers and viewers, and when they accept favours, gifts or other special considerations from vested interest or news sources, it raises serious questions about their objectivity (Alvin, 2000).

On the subject of the code of ethics for journalists, Umejie (n. d.) compared various ethical codes of various media related organizations and found out that the issue of compliance and enforcement are lacking in making the codes merely academic. In the same study reported here, Umejie (n. d.) adduced several reasons why the journalist receives gratifications for his reportorial functions. In the study, it was discovered that 51% of sampled practitioners picked poor wages as the reason for the prevalence of acceptance of gratifications. Low advertising revenue and low readership were also identified as reasons. It was also discovered that gifts given to journalists by news sources were the manifestation of deeper economic problems facing the journalist; as a result, traditional values such as objectivity and truth have been jettisoned on the platform of materialism.

Related studies have also shown that the Nigerian media organizations are not "faithful" in pursuance of specific journalistic principles, especially as it relates to the principle of objectivity. Boyer (1981), as cited in Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2010), viewed objectivity as "balance and even handedness in presenting different sides of an issue; accuracy and realism in reporting; presenting all main relevant points and separating facts from opinion" (p. 120). Objective reporting is the bedrock of journalism and should be transparent and devoid of sentiments or emotions.

In the Nigeria media, the need for objectivity is of paramount importance especially when the news reports involve government officials and personalities who would want to appear as saints before the unsuspecting public. In political processes, there is always the tendency for a party to influence the decisions of the media thereby stifling the objectivity principle of the press. In the constitutional role of the media, Tony Momoh points out the obligations of the media as stated in Section 21 of the 1979 Constitution thus: "the press, radio, television, and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times uphold the fundamental objectives contained in the chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people" (Obianigwe, 2009, p. 28).

In this sense, anyone who decides to participate in the mass communication process either as a publisher or journalist must do so in the understanding that it has a duty to first and foremost monitor governance at all times and freely too. Besides the constitutional role of the media, there are also the media doctrines which

variously believe that the media should be seen as an instrument of national development, as playing a leading and supportive role in national building, enlightenment, education, and dissemination of public information. Nevertheless, these epicentre roles of the media as outlined in its functions are predicated on objectivity (Oseni, 1999, p. 96, as cited in Obianigwe, 2009).

The journalist is not to be totally influenced by pressures from other personalities; hence their duty is to report the news and to do so in the interest of the public rather than individual interests. Reporting news in the interest of certain individuals stifles the objectivity of the press. Olumuyiwa (1988, p. 106), as cited in Obianigwe (2009) had this to say about the importance of objectivity in journalism:

Objectivity in news representation is not a myth, nor a mere philosophical abstraction, but an attainable media goal which the journalist must strive for even in the face of opposing realities. Objectivity in the collating and presenting of news is the goal of the reporter, and a major principle of journalism. In spite of the fierce competition among newspapers, news magazines, radio, TV, or wire services, in regard to who gets a story first and is fastest in making such news items public property, objectivity in the disseminating of news is acknowledged as a significant hallmark of modern journalistic practice. (p. 2)

The concept of objectivity is the oldest and still the key legitimating professional ethic of liberal journalism; it is a guarantee of quality control which asks us to believe that what is being said is valid and believable (McNair, 1998, p. 65). According to Siebert (1956), cited in McNair (1998), "The underlying purpose of the media is to help discover truth, to assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for decision"(p. 65).

It should not be the norm for journalism and the media whose basic tenets are accuracy and fairness to aid the spread of lies and deception. Unfortunately, the growing commercial interests of media organizations, and the drive for dominance by institutions and states have contributed to the erosion of the tradition of truth telling and objectivity in the media. In this guise, the concept of democracy is misrepresented if there is a biased, one sided, slanted view of an issue or report in the news (Obianigwe, 2009, p. 24). The Secretary General of The International Federation of Journalists, Aidan White once said that when journalism is inaccurate, when it marginalizes important issues or denies access to different voices and when it is manipulated to serve narrow interests, it damages democracy (Torres, 2008).

For journalism to survive and to function effectively, journalists must make a conscious effort to protect and nourish the values and public good that flow from committed, ethical journalism. As contained in the International Index of Bribery for News Coverage (2003), cited in Brayton (2008), the objectivity of the media cannot be proved if it is subject to monetary influences and pressures:

A consumer news medium in no culture or situation can declare its objectivity, fairness and communication integrity when gate-keeping decisions are influenced by factors that are unseen and such as occurs with "cash for news coverage". This is especially true in societies that claim to be democratic and civil and humane. An attempt to present truth in a fair and objective manner and in a known context must be seen as a universal value when the value of truthfulness is declared, either explicitly or implicitly. (p. 25)

In Nigeria, many journalists attend political and various events expecting to receive not necessarily scoops, but cash-filled brown envelopes. Local and international observers monitoring ongoing elections warn that the practice is threatening to corrode Nigeria's fledgling democracy because positive publicity is usually reserved for the highest givers. It is an irony that this is supposed to be a profession that is all out to unearth corruption, yet it is now one of the bastions of corruption in the country. Reporters are becoming increasingly perceived as

“hired guns” rather than professionals who are out to serve the public good (Obianigwe, 2009, p. 25).

However, the “brown envelopes” are sometimes seen as a “cannot-do-without” since they aid the survival of the journalist. This syndrome has become so institutionalised in the press that even the senior editors prompt their subordinates to fend for themselves as they go to the fields to gather information. According to Nze, a political writer with the *People's Agenda*, a daily newspaper based in Lagos, recalled that when he was hired, his editors gave him his press credentials with the admonition to “go out there and make money for yourself”. A good political writer could earn about \$200 a month by attending events and collecting brown envelopes and most times you do your job and please some people, those you please would appreciate you (Maharaj, 2003).

Ayodele (1988, p. 111, as cited Obianigwe, 2009) emphasized the fact that there had been severe charges of sycophancy levelled against the media and its staff. Sycophancy in this context refers to the media professionals who sing praises of the powerful people in a bid to get something from them. There are always sycophants in the midst of media men and women who, having abdicated their sacred duty, oath and trust play up to the gallery; journalists whose actions and attitudes appear or actually are snivelling and grovelling. As desirable as objectivity in news presentation, it cannot thrive in climates populated by questionable characters and personalities who have taken over the media industry.

The media are clearly recognized as having four major functions. The surveillance of the environment as well as analyzing and interpreting events in the environment form an important part of these four major functions. Ayodele (1988), cited in Obianigwe (2009, p. 26), further posits “that the degree to which the journalists exhibit sycophantic tendencies or actually plays the sycophant in his surveillance, analytic and interpretative roles, is determined to a large extent by what type of constraints, bias, prejudice or personal opinion he has. Therefore, the journalist is objective only to the extent to which he is not unduly influenced by personal bias, prejudice or other extraneous constraints. Personal bias and constraints could stem from one or a combination of factors: political non neutrality, financial and job insecurity, the journalist's cosmology, prevailing social prejudice and idiosyncrasies”.

However, in whatever way the personal bias or constraints of the media is viewed, the aim of the press here is to give and report issues in a way that it aligns with the public interest, but where there are personal injunctions based on the reasons given above, the subject of the publics' interest tends to be hazy. Ganiyu (2004, p. 17) stressed the fact that journalism demands that its practitioners be incorruptible no matter what they face. They should not succumb to bribery and corruption, never receiving gratification in order to cover or publish an event. Public interest should at all times dictate the conduct of the journalist. Mark Fowler, former Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission defines public interest as that which interests the public (Olukotun, 2005, p.1). McQuail (2003) also views public interest as “The idea that expectations from, and claims against the mass media on the grounds of the wider and longer term good of society can be legitimately expressed and may lead to constraints on the structure or activity of the mass media”(p. 301).

Interestingly, the code of ethics for Nigerian journalists adopted by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) stresses public interest in its preamble thus: “Journalism entails a high degree of public trust. It is morally imperative for every journalist and the various news media to observe the highest professional and ethical standards; in the exercise of his duties, a journalist should always have a healthy regard for public interest”.

Olukotun (2005) posited that this principle was linked to that of the concept of media accountability whereby the media were held down to some notions of responsibility regarding the content, quality and impact of their work, in the larger interest of society. The public interest principle can be traced back to the American

Commission on Freedom of the press of the 1940's which suggested that "the press looks upon itself as performing a public service of a professional kind", which however emphasizes the fact that there are some things which a truly professional man will not do for money.

There are of course deep contentions among scholars as to what constitutes the public interest and who should decide, as the commercial interest of the press seems to override that of the public. According to Dan Agbese (1995), as cited in Olukotun (2005):

Publishing is business; a business is no good unless it survives. The publication which sells is the publication which is successful. It is also the one that survives. Everyone who invests in a newspaper or magazine wants to make money. Unless the publication sells, the money cannot be made and the investment is lost. In the search for profit, there is then the relegation of news worthy issues for those that will bring profits to the organization even when it is not in the common good of the public. (p. 2)

Theoretical Issues

As we note in the introductory part of this paper, the journalist is responsible to the general public in terms of how he/she reports news. This justifies the use of social responsibility theory as a theoretical support for this paper. During the yellow journalism era, most media professionals cared very little for the niceties of accuracy, objectivity, and public sensitivities. But in the first decades of the 20th century, a crusade began among some media professionals to clean up the media and make them more respectable and credible. The watchword of this crusade was professionalism and its goal was elimination of irresponsible and shoddy content (Baran & Davis, 2003, p. 93). As a result, there was the need for a theory to guide this task of media reform and answer questions in relation to:

- (1) Should the media do something more than merely distribute whatever content will earn them the greatest profits in the shortest time?
- (2) Are there some essential public services that the media should provide even if no immediate profits can be earned?
- (3) Should the media become involved in identifying and solving social problems?
- (4) Is it necessary or advisable that the media serve as watchdogs and protect consumers against business fraud and corrupt democrats? (Baran & Davis, 2003, p. 93)

Baran and Davis (2003, p. 93) established the fact that the answers to these questions are contained in the normative theory of the press, which is a type of theory that describes an ideal way for a media system to be structured and operated in particular societies and situations. Normative theories describe the way things should be done if some ideal values and principles are to be realised. Of all the other forms of normative theories, the one that has an enduring appeal for media practitioners, especially American media practitioners, is the Social Responsibility Theory. As at the time Siebert, Peterson and Schramm wrote their book on the Four Theories of the Press, Social Responsibility was clearly recognised as one important construct out of the other three that were mentioned. Social Responsibility theory from all intent and purpose came about to address the rather utopian expectations of the Libertarian theory.

However, some individuals like Harold Lasswell and Walter Lippmann believed in direct regulation of the media by the government agency or commission. This idea was founded on the premise that the media practitioners cannot be trusted to communicate responsibly or to use media to serve public vital needs. From the findings of the Hutchinson Commission on the role of the press, social researchers at the University of

Chicago—the Chicago School opposed the notion of unregulated mass media as they would inevitably serve the interest and tastes of large or socially dominant group and the small groups would be regulated to the background.

Social Responsibility Theory presupposes that the media take it upon themselves to elevate their standards, providing citizens with the sort of material and disinterested guidance they need to govern themselves. Dennis McQuail (2000) summarized the basic principles of social responsibility thus:

(1) Media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society; (2) These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance; (3) In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating within the framework of law and established institutions; (4) The media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offense to minority groups; (5) The media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society by giving access to various points of view and rights of reply; (6) Society and the public have a right to expect high standards of performance and intervention can be justified to secure this for the public good; (7) Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to employers and the market. (p. 212)

With regard to the issue of BES, this theory explains the fact that, media ownership is a form of stewardship rather than unlimited private franchise. In other words, the media are established to serve the intent of the public rather than personal interests. Yet the quest for personal aggrandisement seems to have infiltrated the practice of journalism in Nigeria and beyond. The social responsibility of the press goes further than devotion of the press to the service of public interest through provision of accurate, truthful, and complete accounts of the day's events to the public or self-determined pursuits.

The fact of this theory in essence is that the media must operate within the confines of all social standards and ethics. The Commission on the Freedom of the Press (1942), as cited in Uwakwe (2003), provided an idea about what responsible performance is:

It is the duty of the press to provide a truthful, comprehensive account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. The press should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, give a representative picture of the groups in the society, help in the presentation and clarification of goals and values of the society, and provide full access to the day's intelligence. (p. 283)

Media Professionalism and Ethical Enforcement: The Missing Link

The media of communication are regarded as mirrors through which we can view our world. From news reporting and investigative journalism to the broadcasting of soaps, drama, and films, they provide us with information, entertainment and seek to enhance our understanding of the world. Hence, in often indirect ways, the media engage with and affect our beliefs, values and fundamental commitments to external relationships. Naturally, given the media's increasing presence and influence within our world, a lot of ethical and social questions that need to be addressed have come to the fore. This then means that given the impact of the media, in principle as Abati (1999, p. 69) posits, the media should be responsible to all constituencies in terms of how it reports news, interprets events and mediates social reality.

But often, the media's interests and interests of individual journalists clash with other interests in the environment. Here, although perceptions are usually not the same nevertheless, the media in fulfilling its function as "inspector general of society" must remain true to its own ethics. The media in any society at all, ought to exercise responsibility one way or the other. It presupposes that the media has the capacity, breadth and the mind to impact on society.

After a long study into the nature of the press in Nigeria, Abati (1999) said that beyond the politics of the

media, it faced other challenges relating to practice, ethics, and professionalism, "the future growth of journalism as a profession in the country, would depend on the degree of investment on ethics and professionalism" (p. 88). However, with regards to the subject under discourse, objectivity, truth and other responsibility of the media must be adhered to, in a bid to ensure that some basic rules that apply to the ethics of the media are observed. In Nigeria, the press is no longer keen on giving objective reports to their audience, hence the reason why the image of the press is deteriorating overtime. There have been accusations of bias, press cynicism, media manipulation, condemnations of journalism intrusions into peoples' privacy, worries about the damaging or distorted effect of the televised media on people and the impact of a mediatised world generally. Media manipulations have thus been made possible via the brown envelope received by journalists on several occasions in unholy alliance with news sources and makers. The BES has eaten deep into media practice and professionalism in mostly developing societies thus casting a dark shadow on media credibility. Because of BES, we now have a distorted view of global reality. This is very disturbing if not dangerous in a world that is heavily dependent on the media to make up its mind.

With all that has been identified with the Nigerian journalists, how far have they been able to keep to the code of ethics and ethical standards that have been set? Despite the codes and noble intents that have been put forward by media organizations and associations, incidents of corruption and unethical practices are still rampant in the Nigerian media. It was discovered by the Media Rights Monitor (2000, p. 4, as cited in Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2010) that these vices thrive in the Nigeria media industry because the culture of ethics and sound morality in the Nigeria journalism is a culture which is never heeded by those who preach it. According to the Media Rights Monitor, many senior editors are eager to receive lucrative media consultancy contracts with government officials, wealthy individuals, and organizations and they are often alleged to go to these places to negotiate sale of stories filed in by reporters that are not favourable to persons and groups concerned. There are also no official instruments with which to enforce adherence to ethical values in Nigeria and where such exists, the pedigree of the persons vested with such authority is often a subject of concern.

Numerous journalists, on the basis of friendship, ethnic and religious affinity, relationship or in deference to authority, set aside their professional judgment in the performance of journalistic functions. They then perpetrate corruption and unethical practices through tendering of bias reports, where the journalists often become more political than politicians by not giving all parties to an issue the benefit of responding to charges published against them. Thus, Nigerian journalists instead of reporting events have become events themselves.

These situations as described make it important for a professional code of conduct to regulate media performance and professional conduct. The importance of ethics is underscored by the fact that all journalists and professional associations worldwide have ethical standards that guide and regulate their members' professional activities. Also, numerous media organizations have in-house ethical standards prescribed for their journalists. In Nigeria, besides the NUJ Code of Conduct, numerous media organizations also have in-house codes that they make available to journalists upon employment.

Although the NUJ's Code of Conduct or the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice can be seen as constraining behaviours of individual journalists, they may also help journalists to resist what they see as unethical behaviour and to defend journalistic integrity (Harcup, 2004). In Nigeria, code of ethics for journalists was first established and adopted by the Nigeria Press organisation (NPO) in 1979. This code paved way for a new one which is currently in existence. Nigerian journalists pledge to abide by these codes of ethics and to observe them judiciously. The extent to which these codes have been observed by Nigerian journalist is so

limited especially with regards to the issue under discourse. According to Okunna (2005, p. 93), there is an erroneous notion that ethics cannot be enforced; it is however the press council which is an appropriate organ for the enforcement of ethical codes in journalism, and the Nigerian Press Council should be empowered to play its role in the effort to enthrone balance in the nation's media content. Omole (2000) as cited in Okunna (2005) emphasized the role of the NPC thus:

The Nigerian Press Council is a quality control arbiter that facilitates the promotion of a fair, vigorous and credible journalism by providing the forum where the public and the news media can engage each other in examining ethical standards of truth, balance and fairness. (p. 93)

With recourse to the BES, the issues specified in the code of ethics that concerns this topic can be clearly drawn from: Accuracy and Fairness, Rewards and Gratification, Access to Information, and Public Interest. This entails that the issue of financial gratification is important and draws with it several other implications that could alter the journalism profession.

However, our worry here is that this code has been in existence for more than a decade now and still BES has become even more hydra-headed and complex in its application. This malady has become institutionalized in the Nigerian media industry, that eradicating it seems herculean. But the truth remains that no matter how long a disease stays in the human body, it does not make it right or become part of the original human mechanism or system. Therefore, enforcement of the various codes that preach professionalism is the only way to ensure ethical conduct and behaviour amongst journalists and other categories of media practitioners. This is what we consider, from our empirical findings, as the missing link in the quest to rid the media industry in Nigeria from the monster called BES.

We know that pessimists will criticise how this could be achieved. We make bold to say that not all Nigerian journalists and media practitioners are corrupt. There are a lot of them out there who detest anything immoral, unprofessional and unethical, including BES. They may be few but with concerted efforts and media attention to the issues raised in this paper, this could be curbed and even be eradicated with time. What is urgently needed in the meantime is to appoint men of proven integrity to hold sway in the bodies that are supposed to control the activities of the practitioners in the industry. They should also be empowered to do their jobs. We believe that immediately convictions start coming after trials, others will sit up.

Before this stage could be reached, government and private operators should attempt to make the industry somehow attractive with improved welfare packages, so that the common excuse of making the ends to meet will no longer be tenable. But what surprises us in the course of this study is that most of the persons involved in this disgraceful professional misconduct will never let a thief who stole to eat to go free. This means that poverty and hunger could never justify stealing or killing. So, why would a journalist use poverty and hunger to justify professional misconduct, immorality, and unethical practices? Definitely, this can no longer be an acceptable excuse for the professional misconduct called BES.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper is based on the findings of a study on BES by Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2010), which evaluated media practitioners' perception of BES as an unethical issue in the Nigerian media industry. The findings were validated through the multiple methods of data collection undertaken. For instance, the researchers used a combination of interviews with senior editors in the chosen newspapers, observation of

events in press conferences and survey of practicing journalists in Lagos, Nigeria.

The study recommended that for a strong capital base, mergers and acquisitions be encouraged so that they can have a strong capital base to provide for worker's welfare; editorial policy about rewards and gratifications has to be clear and distinctive so that media institutions could apply sanctions to journalists that accept gratification from news sources as long as they pay these journalists well; the NUJ should enforce industry wide welfare standards so as to fortify the integrity of journalists to resist bribery in whatever form it comes.

However, majority of the journalists were of the opinion that the following measures could help address the situation:

- (1) Proper education and understanding of the meaning of BES;
- (2) Adequate ethical orientation;
- (3) Improved welfare packages;
- (4) Fear of God;
- (5) Organization of public campaigns and workshops for media people and givers;
- (6) Proper reward in media organization and prompt payment of salaries;
- (7) Enhanced working conditions/ improved conditions of service;
- (8) Enhanced self worth;
- (9) Provision of logistics (transportation) for staff during official assignments;
- (10) Sustained awareness creation on the malaise;
- (11) Employees should be treated with dignity;
- (12) Job security measures should be put in place;
- (13) Professionalism and enforcement of professional codes that guide the industry;
- (14) Provision of adequate equipment and resources for doing the work;
- (15) Checking the infiltration of quacks into the system;
- (16) Overall improvement in the economic climate in the country;
- (17) Recognition of the role of journalists by the government;
- (18) Better and improved motivation;
- (19) Stiffer sanctions on givers and takers of BES by the Nigerian Union of Journalists;
- (20) The Economic Financial and Crimes Commission should be strengthened to check against corrupt politicians so as to reduce corruption;
- (21) Enactment of a specific law against the BES;
- (22) Organizers of events should give journalists advertisements instead of brown envelopes;
- (23) Reduce time pressure on journalists;
- (24) Honest leaders and leadership;
- (25) Proper building of the nation's economy;
- (26) Retirement benefits;
- (27) Roper editorial checks;
- (28) Societal checks;
- (29) Inter-industry competitive remuneration;
- (30) Changing reporters' beats;
- (31) Morality should be instilled in the journalist;
- (32) The Freedom of Information bill should be passed by the government so that journalists would be

conscious of the journalists' ethical codes;

- (33) Media ombudsman;
- (34) Promotion and celebration of journalists who have made desirable achievements;
- (35) Proper organization of the NUJ like other professional bodies e.g., ICAN.

On the other hand, the minority respondents who did not feel that the tradition could be combated also gave reasons which included:

- (1) African culture to show appreciation;
- (2) Brown envelopes do not influence journalists to give bias reports;
- (3) Media relations and corporate gifts cannot be separated from money gratifications;
- (4) Poor remuneration;
- (5) Inadequate monitoring of published items;
- (6) Gatekeepers' perception;
- (7) Capitalists run media organizations with their own interest uppermost in their minds than that of the workers;
- (8) Organisers may see you as unwilling to report the news when you do not accept it/ gives take offence when appreciation is turned down;
- (9) Universal practice that cannot be ruled out;
- (10) The greed of some journalists cannot be ignored;
- (11) Insincerity of the Nigerian system encouraged by the larger society;
- (12) The "pay before service" mentality in Nigeria;
- (13) Pressures and the desperate need for favourable coverage by organizations.

The willingness of the journalists to aid in the dejection of this practice is hinged on the fact that for the practice to be curbed, other issues of welfare and motivation must be considered, rather than the long held view that it is mainly the meagre salaries of the journalists that prompts them to receive brown envelopes. We therefore conclude that strengthening and enforcement of the existing codes in the industry remain the missing link in our quest to entrench true professionalism and ethical practices in the Nigerian media industry.

References

- Abati, R. (1999). The media in Nigeria: Patriots or cynics? In T. Oseni (Ed.), *The media, transition, and Nigeria* (pp. 56-78), Nigeria: Solaprint.
- Adewale, F. (2008, June 12). The rot in Nigerian journalism is much deeper than we thought. Retrieved August 16, 2011 from <http://www.ngex.com/news/public/article.php?ArticleID=961>
- Akabogu, C. (2005). The ethical journalist and brown envelope syndrome: The way forward. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 201-205.
- Alvin, D. (2000). *Ethics in media communication: Cases and controversies*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Baran, S., & Davis, D. (2003). *Mass communication theory: Foundation, ferment, and the future*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Brayton, C. (2008, July 8). Afghanistanism in Nigerian journalism. Retrieved September 16, 2008 from <http://tupiwire.wordpress.com/>
- Charles, B. (1999). The media as conscience of the nation. In T. Oseni (Ed.), *The media, transition, and Nigeria* (pp. 21-34). Nigeria: Solaprint.
- Danladi, K. (2008, September 14). Choppe syndrome in Nigerian journalism. Retrieved October 14, 2008 from <http://www.saharareporters.com/>
- Easterman, M. (2003, October 7). Nigerian press program 0340. *Common ground: Radio's weekly program on world affairs*. Retrieved August 7, 2008 from <http://commongroundradio.org/>

- Ekeanyanwu, N. T., & Obianigwe, N. (2010). Perception of Lagos-Based journalists on brown envelope syndrome (BES) in the coverage of news events in Nigeria. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, 1(1), 117-125.
- Ganiyu, M. (2004). *The reporter's companion: A complete guide in news reporting and writing companion series 1*. Nigeria: Emgee.
- Hanson, R. E. (2005). *Mass communication: Living in a media world*. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Harcup, T. (2004). *Journalism: Principles and practice*. London: Sage
- Hermawan, A. (2006, July 23). *Indonesia: Journalists start against "envelop journalism"*. Retrieved August 7, 2008 from <http://www.asiamedia.com/>
- Maharaj, D. (2003, April 17). *A good scoop in Nigeria fills reporter's purse*. Retrieved September 16, 2008 from <http://www.latimes.com/>
- McNair, B. (1998). *The sociology of journalism*. London: Arnold.
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Ngwodo, C. (2008). *Truth, power, and the Nigerian press*. Retrieved August 9, 2008 from <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/>
- Obianigwe, N. (2009). Perception of Lagos-Based journalists on brown envelope syndrome in the coverage of news events in Nigeria (an unpublished B.Sc. Project, submitted in the Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University).
- Okoye, T. (2007, August 29). *How to stop brown envelope syndrome*. Retrieved September 28, 2008 from <http://www.sunnewsonline.com>
- Okunna, S. (2003). Media ethics: Making media professionals partners in national development. In Uwakwe (Ed.), *Communication and National Development* (pp. 66-81). Nigeria: Africa Links Books.
- Okunna, S. (2005). Re-inventing media content in Nigeria: Creating a balance between social responsibility and business concern. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 85-93.
- Olukotun, A. (2005). The media and national development. In Oso, Lai (Ed.), *Communication and Development* (pp. 34-51), Nigeria: Jedidah Publishers.
- Omenugha, K., & Oji, M. (2007). *News commercialisation, ethics and objectivity in journalism in practice in Nigeria: Strange bed fellows*. Retrieved September 16, 2008 from <http://www.labcom.ubi.pt/ec>
- Onyisi, T. (1996). Mass Media Ethics: Analysing the 'Brown Envelope' or 'AWUFU' syndrome. In I. Nwosu & U. Ekwo (Eds.), *Mass media and marketing communications* (pp. 78-91). Enugu: Thoughts Communications Publishers.
- Oseni, T. (Ed.). (1999). *The media, transition, and Nigeria*. Nigeria: Solaprint.
- Torres, J. (2008, July 18). *Unethical practice is threatening journalism*. Retrieved August 26, 2008 from <http://www.gmanews.tv/nation>
- Umejie, E. (n. d.). Brown envelop syndrome and salad journalism. *Poor Remuneration Bane of Nigerian Journalism 2*. Retrieved September 18, 2008 from <http://www.independentngonline.com/>
- Uwakwe, O. (Ed.) (2003). *Communication and national development*. Nigeria: Africa Links Books.
- Zaggi, H. (2007, June 28). *Editorial independence in Nigeria media: The way forward*. Retrieved 2008 from <http://www.nasarawastate.org/newsday/index/html>