

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COLLECTING BROWN ENVELOPE BY NIGERIAN JOURNALISTS

MURTALA SALIHU

Abdu Gusau Polytechnic TalataMafaraZamfara State, Nigeria
E-mail: msalihu99@gmail.com

Abstract - Over the years, ethical issues revolving around acceptance of brown envelope by many Nigerian journalists have continued to attract endless discussion among media stake holders. Methodologically, this study relied on relevant literatures on the prevalence of brown envelope syndrome in the Nigerian media environment. On the basis of many studies and an increasing number of media commentaries aim at addressing the menace; this study reveals that brown envelope collection in Nigeria is always on the increase and has since found a permanent place to stay. The paper also unveils how brown envelope collection is militating against objectivity, balance and fairness, accuracy, and credible reporting, which necessitates condemnations from various scholars. The dominant reason for accepting brown envelope by many journalists in Nigeria has to do with poor salary. However, stripping brown envelope from all sorts of technicalities and excuses, it is morally wrong for journalists to demand for or accept brown envelope in order to suppress important facts and information. As such, this study admonishes media practitioners to observe the tenets of social responsibility theory as a foundation for their journalistic practice. The recommendations offered in this piece will also help a lot in curbing the ethical implications of collecting brown envelope by Nigerian journalists.

Index Terms: Brown envelope, Ethical implication, Journalism, Media, Objectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

Brown envelope, freebies or rewards and gratifications have been abhorred by media ethicists and journalistic codes of practice. Over the years, ethical issues revolving around acceptance of brown envelope by many Nigerian journalists have continued to attract endless discussion among media stake holders. In simpler term, brown envelope can be refers to as collecting a gifts or any gratification for performing journalistic duties. Whenever collected, brown envelope has the power of influencing the judgement of a reporter to distort the definition of news (see for instance Onyisi, 1996; Akabogu, 2005; Nwabueze, 2010). For Okunna (1995), she views brown envelope as “a monetary bribe handed out to an unethical journalist to pressurize him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants.” She concludes that “once accepted, monetary bribes and other gifts tie the hands of journalists who then become incapable of being objective in reporting events and issues involving people who give the gifts” (1995, p.57). Although, the meaning of the term varies from context to context, yet it is good to mention here that, this study acknowledges the opinion of Skjerdal (2010) who posits that the term “ is applied to denote journalistic activity which involves transfer of various types of rewards from sources to the reporter.” In other words, it comprises a “ range of incentives involving cash (brown envelopes) and other gifts (freebies) that may put the journalist’s independence into question” (2010, p.370-371).

Of course, it is difficult to say when brown envelope started to be associated with Nigerian journalism. But, Nwabueze, (2010, p.498) speculates that “ its origin in Nigeria could be rooted in the culture of

presenting kola nuts to visitors, a hospitality practice common in many African societies.” As such, news sources consider giving incentives to journalists who visit them for coverage of news and information as a sign of appreciation. Nevertheless, by going beyond the culture, Uko (2004) established that, brown envelope collection could be traced to Second Republic (1979-1983) when government ministers used to give bribe to journalists for their stories to be published in the national dailies. Uko further declares that by 1983, journalists had clearly begun to request for incentives as a condition to conduct an interview.

The methodological approach to this study heavily relied on previous studies on the prevalence of brown envelope syndrome in the Nigerian media environment. On the basis of many studies and an increasing number of media commentaries aim at addressing the menace; it is reasonable to declare in this premise that brown envelope syndrome in Nigeria is always on the increase and has since found a permanent place to stay. (see for instance Onyisi, 1996; Okoro&Ugwuanyi; 2006; Adeyemi&Okorie, 2009; Nwabueze, 2010; Ekeanyanwu&Obianigwe, 2012). The aim of this study therefore, is to build on these studies and emphasize on the weighty implications of brown envelope collection which serves as a bane for many ethical violations. As such, the study will at the end, call the perpetrators in to order and as well offer vital recommendations.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Today, the obsession with unlimited gains and enormous corruption by Nigerian journalists at the expense of morals and ethics has led to inglorious fall of some media organizations. Gone are the days when

people believe whatever they read or listen to from media houses. In the past, backing up ones claim with "I read it or I watched it" from media outlet settled any argument on the veracity of such claims. In contrast, what we see today is naked fabrications, biased reportage, sycophancy, sensationalism and so on from some journalists who collect brown envelopes from news sources. Such kinds of journalists have failed woefully in their moral journalistic duties.

In Nigeria also, it is a well-known fact even from a casual media observer that, journalists are given brown envelopes [code-named differently in Nigeria as PR, Kola, Kwa, Keske, egunje, awufu and so on] "by government minister, agency, ministry, individual or a corporate organization, to colour the truth, tell a lie, stop or publish a story. If news is published on the basis of brown envelope, how then does the journalist guarantee objectivity and fairness which are fundamental responsibilities of the journalist?" (Asira and Okpo, 2013, p.16). Of course, this kind of question defies a simplistic answer.

The dominant explanation given by some journalists to justify the collection of brown envelope has to do with poor salary. To them, Journalists working, as fulltime, and as freelancers, are overall poorly salaried. Danladi (2008) in Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012, p.519) testifies that " Nigerian journalists were the most poorly paid in terms of their total welfare package." He states further that "Some earn as little as NGN 15, 000 (Less than a \$100) a month..." Corroborating further on this, Nwabueze (2010) says "the situation is virtually the same today with most journalists, especially those working for privately owned media establishments, earning below NGN 20,000 (less than \$110) monthly" (2010, p.504). Some journalists as such found themselves in difficult moments of balancing their needs, discharging their duties and adherence to journalistic codes of practices.

In the light of the foregoing, some journalists in these difficult moments choose to cash in on the concept of situational ethics. According to Akabogu (2005), situational ethics "may justify bribery received by a journalist on the basis that he is probably not well paid and he is faced with a lot of financial problems within and outside his work environment" (2005, p. 203).

However, the contention by some scholars is that, some well -paid journalists were found guilty of taking brown envelope and as such, debunking such hypocritical agitations. In her study, Nwabueze, (2010) "establishes that poor remuneration may not be the only major reasons for the growth of the brown envelope syndrome because journalists from organizations that pay relatively good salaries still collect brown envelopes" (2010, p.141).

More problematically, brown envelope collection cannot be divorced from Nigerian environment within which Nigerian journalists operate. To this end, brown envelope is a reflection of corrupt nature of Nigeria as a nation state. Asira and Okpo (2013, p.16) argue that, "In Nigeria, graft and corruption have become normal way of life for many, not only for political office holders and government officials. Corruption has polluted every section of our national life –from the naked theft of public funds by adults to examination malpractices by school children." Hence, Nwabueze (2010, p.142) quoted Reuben Abatias lamenting that, "The journalist is also a member of the society and if we are an exceptionally corrupt society, then the media cannot be innocent. They are just as corrupt as the society."

Moreover, an accusing finger has also been pointed at the attitudes of some untrained journalists who found destiny in to journalism practice. Journalism in Nigeria is still an all- comers affairs, which allows any graduate that can write well to practice in the profession. " Of course, the truth is that such untrained journalists are grossly unethical; they don't see journalism as a professional field in the first place, so they don't bother to maintain any professional standards, hence the wanton demand for cheap rewards in order to write favourable reports" (Ikechukwu, 2014, p.152).

Stripping brown envelope from all sorts of technicalities and excuses, it is heinous act for journalists to demand for or accept brown envelope. This is morally wrong as well, because it can influence the objectivity judgment of the journalist to be biased, unbalanced, untruthful, inaccurate, sycophantic and sensationalize certain news stories. To this end, Ndubuisi as cited in Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) preaches that "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" (2012, p.519). Therefore, this study will attempt to explore brown envelope collection as a bane for many ethical violations by Nigerian journalists.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is anchored on Social Responsibility Theory of the press. Many literatures testified that the theory originated from the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, set up in the USA in 1947 to re-examine the press freedom in the fallout of Libertarian system. Its emergence was also influenced by the findings of the Royal commission of the Press set up in Great Britain in 1949. The theory believes that freedom comes with attendant obligation. Therefore the press should be responsible to the society by ensuring the discharge of their

journalistic duties with high sense of journalistic standards. McQuail (2010) avers that, the findings of the commission under the chairmanship of Robert Hutchins named the key journalistic standards that the press should seek to maintain as thus:

A responsible press should provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. It should serve as the forum for the exchange of comments and criticism and be a common carrier of public expression. Thirdly, the press should give a representative picture of constituent groups in society and also present and clarify the goals and values of society. The report criticized the sensationalism of the press and mixing of news with editorial opinion. (2010, p. 170).

With regards to brown envelope collection, Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) argue that, social responsibility 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" (2012, p.524). Therefore, there is need for self-regulation against ethical and social irresponsibility which the brown envelope collection has posed to journalism noble profession.

From the foregoing, the fact of this theory in essence remains that the media should operate within the confines of all social standards and ethics. Therefore, "Codes of ethics are encouraged as a self-regulatory device to promote social responsibility" (Day, 2006, p.37). A responsible journalist is the one who always tempers his journalism with reason, sensitivity and commitment by synchronising "freedom", "rationality" and "duty." (Merril and Barney, 1982).

IV. BROWN ENVELOPE AND JOURNALISTIC CODES OF ETHICS

Like every other profession, journalism has established codes and regulations governing its practice. These rules and regulations are generally called ethics which forms the major crux of this study. Ethics is an important part of human existence which stipulates personal duties of an individual to himself and to others. Philosophers emphasized the facts that ethics is synonymous with morality and both involve human action (Pratt, 1988). History has it that, the word 'ethics' comes from the Greek word 'ethos' which means character, while the word 'morals' comes from the Latin word 'moralist' simply meaning custom or manner.

According to Omole (2000) as cited by Okunna (2003) ethics can be defined as "the shared normative values, which any society holds dear and are used to

judge the behaviour or performance of any member of a society. It sets out the minimum of acceptable behaviour which any member should attain to be regarded as a good ambassador of that society "(2003, p.2). Ethics is always concern with such concepts as right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, good and bad, approval and disapproval, responsible and irresponsible, permissible and impermissible, acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in our actions and deeds. In journalism 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"(Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe, 2012, p.516). Journalism ethics therefore become an integral parts of media professionalism.

In its design and content, Nigeria borrowed code of ethics from Britain and America in order to ensure professional integrity during journalistic practices (Christopher and Onwuka, 2013). The Nigerian code of ethics for journalists was first established and adopted by the Nigeria Press organisation (NPO) in 1979. This code began with a preamble that enjoins all who want to participate in the profession of journalism to abide by the professional and ethical standards cast forth in 14 categories, which summarily deals with Editorial Independence, Accuracy and Fairness, Privacy, Privilege/Non-Disclosure, Decency, Discrimination, Reward and Gratification; Violence; Children and Minors; Access to Information; Social Responsibility; Plagiarism and Copyright. This code also reflects the emergence of new ones found to be existing today in the Nigerian Press Council, Nigeria Union of Journalists and Nigerian Guild of Editors with insignificant minor changes.

To buttress the weighty implications of collecting brown envelope; both international, regional and national codes of ethics categorically condemn the phenomenon as morally wrong. Ewelukwu (2004) began by citing the international code, which is code-named The Journalist's Professional Integrity, and forms article IV of the international code thus, "The integrity of the profession does not permit the journalist to accept any form of bribe or the promotion of any private interest contrary to the general welfare." Similarly, in the West African Sub region, the charter of the West African Journalists' Association, WAJA, in its Article X, abhors the brown envelope syndrome that, "in all circumstances, the journalist must show proof of integrity by avoiding of illicit remuneration, directly or indirectly. He also has the duty of refusing to aid and abet the promotion of interests that are contrary to the general wellbeing." Again at the national level, Ewelukwu (2004) says that, The Nigerian Press Organization which is today known as Nigerian Press Council, firmly warned that, "a journalist should not give or accept bribe in order to publish or suppress

information neither should he accept patronage or gratification of any type because this will affect the society's expectation on him of an unbiased, accurate and fair report of people and events" (2004, p.282-283).

From the foregoing, it can be clearly established that brown envelope syndrome has not been accommodated legitimately in the practice of journalism anywhere in the world. However, the worry of this study here is that; these codes have been in existence for many decades now and still brown envelope continue to thrive and has already become a cancer worm that has eaten deeply in to the fabrics of Nigerian journalism. This is because, many Nigerian journalists are not realistically ready to abide by the culture of sound ethics and morality as they publically preached it.

Nevertheless, in an optimistic notes, Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) said, "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 behavior amongst journalists and other categories of media practitioners" (2012, p.526). This is equally what this study is advocating for.

Ethical implications of collecting brown envelope

The deteriorating image of Nigerian journalists as a result of brown envelope seriously requires urgent attention. In short, it is casting a great shadow on Nigerian media credibility as a whole. This is a source of concern to all media stakeholders due to its burden in many ethical violations. In other words, Brown envelope collection is a root for media manipulations, subjectivity, biased reportage, sycophancy, fakery, moonlighting, pressure, afghanistanism, and press cynicism on a whole. In essence, the menace negates the provisions of various journalistic codes of ethics to a greater extent. In the first place, a journalist who collect bribe can hardly be an objective reporter as it will compromise his reputation to be an independent reporter. Objectivity is a media doctrine that preaches neutrality, fairness, balance and independence. Objective reporting is a concrete foundation for transparent journalism which is devoid of all sorts of sentimentalities.

A journalist who collect brown envelope cannot be guaranteed to be objective due to the monetary influences and pressure. No wonder, The Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) urged the journalist to "resists threats or any other inducements to influence, distort or suppress information and takes no unfair personal advantage of information gained in the course of her/his duties before the information is

public knowledge. (see <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code>).

In the second place, brown envelope collection has the power of influencing journalist to act under pressure according to the dictate of those who give the gifts. "many journalists engaged in activities that are against the norms of their profession. Pressure can cause a journalist to be irresponsible or unethical if the source of the pressure compels the journalist to carry out actions that are contrary to journalistic ethical principles" (Asira and Okpo, 2013, p.16). Acting under pressure contradicts editorial independence, which is a first provision of Nigeria Press Council that stated, "decisions concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of a professional journalist" (see NPC, 1998). In this premise, Udopia (1987) as cited in Nwabueze (2010) admonishes that "Brown envelope and free tickets can compromise your integrity as a journalist. [...] If you don't accept gifts, you will feel freer to report an accurate assessment of an event or issue. Gifts are to influence your coverage. Avoid them" (2010, p.516). Another implication of collecting brown envelope by Nigerian journalists is the birth of sycophancy which has become another ethical worry. Sycophancy has to do with insincere praises and flatteries of people in government, politics or business in order to gain undue advantages in turn. A sycophant journalist can hardly say the truth in his bid to establish fairness, balance and accuracy during reportage. This also negates the second provision of Nigeria Press Council which stated that, "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" (NPC, 1998). Sycophancy has assumed a very worrisome ethical setback in Nigeria, where journalists address prominent people with favourable titles, manipulate stories in their favour, create positive news stories for them and deny rights of reply from oppositions. Before this study ends, it is highly essential to tender the following recommendations:

1. Improve welfare package: The welfare package of Nigerian journalists need to be improved by media owners. No one can gainsay the fact that, Journalists in Nigeria operate with meagre amount of salary compared with other professionals like doctors who are rewarded with a special salary package by the government. This has made Nigerian journalists to fall prey to monetary inducements because they are not well paid.

2. Adequate ethical orientation: There is need for total ethical orientation especially against brown envelope collection to be featured in different media programmes' presentations. Ethically-oriented training and sensitization of the journalists will surely expose them to the inherent burdens that are associated with the acceptance of brown envelope

and the need to resist the temptation whenever offered.

3. Enforceable and justifiable codes by the media regulatory bodies: Media regulatory bodies such as Nigeria Press Council (NPC), Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE) Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and so on should wake up to their duties. They should accelerate efforts towards ensuring adherence to ethics in pursuit of professionalism during the practice of journalism in Nigeria.

4. Sincerity and commitment from the part of journalists themselves: Journalists should strive on their own to resist temptation of brown envelope whenever given. Those with better pay among them should be contented with what they earn than unnecessarily damaging their conscience to collect what is not their right.

5. Checking the infiltration of quacks into the system: Media stake holders should put measures of identifying charlatans and quacks that are out there to tarnish the image of journalism profession. Government should set an acceptable level of education for those who want to practice in the profession. A high level of journalism qualification should serve as a pre-requisite for all those who want to work in the media industries.

REFERENCE

- [1] A.Adeyemi and N. Okorie "The perception of Nigerian journalists on brown envelope syndrome: South-west media practitioners in perspective" Paper presented at the Nigeria Chapter of African Council for Communication Education (ACCE) conference, University of Maiduguri. November 2009.
- [2] C.EAkabogu (2005). "The Ethical Journalist and Brown Envelop Syndrome: The Way Forward" *International Journal of Communication*, Vol.—No. 3, pp.203, 2005.
- [3] A.E, Asira and O.Okpo "The Price of Truth: Corruption and Norms of Journalism in Nigeria" *New Media and Mass communication (online)* Vol.12, pp. 16, 2013. [Accessed December 15, 2015] Available at: www.iiste.org
- [4] N.Christoperand O. Onwuka "Media ethics in the development of journalism in Nigeria" *Central European Journal of Communication (online)* No. 10, 2013. [Accessed November 27, 2015] Available at: www.ceeol.com.
- [5] L. Day (2006): *Ethics in Media Communication; Cases and Controversies*, 5th edition, USA: Thompson Higher education
- [6] N.T.Ekeanyanwu and N.O.Obianigwe "The Nigerian Press, Brown Envelope Syndrome (BES) and Media Professionalism: The Missing Link" *Journalism and Mass communication* Vol.2, no.4, pp. 514-529, April 2012. (online) [Accessed December 20, 2015] Available at: <http://eprints.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/1211/1/The%20Nigerian%20Press%20Brown%20Envelope%20Syndrome%28BES%29%20and%20Media%20Professionalism.pdf>
- [7] B. N.Ewelukwa(2004). *Introduction to Nigerian Press Law*. Onitsha: Maranatha Press.
- [8] <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code>
- [9] W. E.Ikechukwu "Brown Envelope Syndrome and the Future of Journalism in Nigeria" *International Interdisciplinary Journal of Scientific Research*.Vol. 1, no.1 pp. 152, September 2014.(Online) 1(1) [Accessed November 17, 2015] Available at: www.iijsr.org
- [10] D.McQuail (2010) *Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage Publication
- [11] Nigerian Press Council (2008) *Code of Conduct for Nigerian Journalists*. Nigerian Press Council Publication
- [12] C. Nwabueze(2010) "Value System, News Values and Journalism Ethics: The Nigerian Experience" In Des Wilson (ed.) *Perspectives on Communication and Culture*Uyo: BSM Resources
- [13] C.Nwabueze (2010) "Brown envelopes and the need for ethical reorientation: Perceptions of Nigerian journalists" *AfricanCommunication Research (online)* Vol.3 No.3 497-521 [Accessed December 2nd 2015] Available at: <http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/files/articles/ACR/Bribery%20and%20corruption%20in%20African%20journalism.pdf>
- [14] N. Obianigwe(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
- [15] N.M. Okoro and J.Ugwuanyi *Brown envelope syndrome and mass media objectivity in Nigeria*. *African Journal of Communicationand Development*, Vol. 1, no.1, pp. 123–48, September, 2006.
- [16] C. S.Okunna(1995). *Ethics of Mass Communication*. Enugu: New Generation Books.
- [17] C. S.Okunna (2003). *Ethics of Mass Communication (Second edition)*, Enugu: New Generation Books.
- [18] T. E.Onyisi (1996). "Mass Media Ethics: Analysing the Brown Envelope or "AWUFU" Syndrome in Nigeria". In: I. E. Nwosu and U. Ekwo (Eds.) *Mass Media and Marketing Communications: Principles, Perspectives & Practice*: Enugu: Thought Communications Publishers.
- [19] C.B. Pratt (1988). *Responsibility and ethical reasoning in the Nigerian press*. *Africa Media Review*,2, pp. 46–64.
- [20] T.Skjerdal "Research on brown envelope journalism in the African media" *African Communication Research (online)* Vol. 3, no 3, pp. 367-406, December 2010. [Accessed December 2nd 2015] Available at: <http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/files/articles/ACR/Bribery%20and%20corruption%20in%20African%20journalism.pdf>
- [21] N.Uko (2004). *Romancing the gun.The press as a promoter of military rule*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

