

Influence of brown envelope syndrome on journalism Practice in ebonyi state

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Abstract

The study examines the influence brown envelope has on practicing journalists in Ebonyi State. The objectives of the study among others are to ascertain the level of knowledge of journalists on brown envelope syndrome, to ascertain the areas brown envelope syndrome are made manifest in the profession. The study was guided by two theories, the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press and the Cognitive Moral Development Theory. The study used Survey Research method. Two hundred and ninety-six copies of questionnaire were administered to registered journalists who were purposively selected in Ebonyi State. The findings of the study reveal that majority of the journalists are aware that brown envelope exists in the profession and it has become a common practice in the profession among others. Based on the findings, the study recommended that since majority of the journalists are aware of brown envelope syndrome, media bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the industry. The National Union of Journalists and other professional bodies should ensure that there is real unionism in the profession by ensuring that journalists' rights are not trampled upon. Also, there should be sound education and professional training of journalists in order to achieve true professionalism and curb brown envelope syndrome.

Keywords: Brown envelope syndrome, influence, Journalism, Practice, Ebonyi State.

Introduction

Journalism is one of the interesting and important professions in Nigeria. Unfortunately, Oberiri (2016) reveals that journalists are often faced with the quest to protect their stomach at the expense of journalistic ethics. The adage that he who pays the piper dictates the tune becomes practical in this case; a journalist who collects money on a report will definitely influence his reportage to suit the intention of the person he has sold his integrity, fairness, justice, and objectivity. Asemah (2011) elaborates that the most common type of bribe in journalism is the so-called brown envelope which is monetary bribe given to journalists to pressurize them into doing what the giver wants. Once accepted, monetary bribe and other gifts tie the hands of the journalist who then becomes incapable of being objective in reporting events and issues involving people who gave the gift. Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012, p. 517) add that;

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 favor of the customer. Similarly, Williams (2014) postulates that since the brown envelope syndrome found its way into Nigerian journalism, it has refused all attempts to be curbed. In fact, it is now fast assuming a conventional status, as most journalists now demand and take bribe monies and other forms of bribery as a prerequisite for performing their traditional duties of providing information, education and entertainment to the society. This implies that, Journalists now see brown envelope practice as a normal tradition, coining such practices as *chop* which means collect money before you publish or broadcast anything.

Ekerikevwe (2009) reveals that brown envelope is common in journalism practice in Nigeria. It is a situation whereby journalists demand for bribe or other forms of gratification before they cover any events or even publish stories. This act has and is still eating deep into the fairness, objectivity and balance of daily news reporting, causing huge threat to journalism practice. Bello & Adejola (2010) elaborate that the implications range from loss of public trust and confidence, loss of professional integrity and sense of duty and inability to uphold the six cardinal elements or canons of journalism – truth, fairness, objectivity, accuracy, independence and responsibility. When a journalist engages in brown envelope practice, he tends to lose his value, trust, confidence, loss of professionalism. He/She ought to play the role of gathering, analyzing and disseminating news and information about people, events and issues in society which could be in form of news, commentaries, editorials, advertorials, news analysis, profiles, columns, cartoons, pictures or magazine feature via mass communication medium such as radio, television newspapers, magazine, digital TV, face book, you tube, 2go and other numerous social media to a heterogeneous audience simultaneously or about the same time (Ogunkwo, in Suntai and Vakkai (2014).

Suntai and Vakkai (2014) opine that, this huge task imposes on journalists across the globe the need to be objective to ensure the survival and blossoming of the profession as well as retain the integrity of the profession and its practitioners. This calls for strict observance of professional ethics or codes of conduct by professionals. The ethics are the moral guide for practitioners to be truthful, objective and balanced (unbiased) in their practice to be able to positively affect the profession and society in which they practice. By implication, a journalist ought to reject any form of bribe in order for him/her to be just/truthful in reporting event as it occurs, not manipulating facts/figures to please the person who has paid him but be firm and just; reporting occurrences as it happens, burrowing social vices in the society, making in-depth and interpretative reporting in order to sensitized and enlighten the public. It is on this note that this paper investigated the influence of brown envelop syndrome on journalism practice in Ebonyi State with a view of fashioning ways of promoting ideal professional journalistic practice in the State.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of brown envelope syndrome has become a serious ethical challenge posing threat to the image of journalism practice in Nigeria. This affects objectivity and balanced reportage of news. In journalism, the ethical problem of materialism is manifested in the form of bribery and acceptance of gifts (Okunna, 2001). In the course of their duties, some journalists accept money and other non-monetary gifts which compromise their integrity and that of their respective media organizations. However, in Ebonyi State, the issue of brown envelope among journalists is common and this act seems to be threatening the credibility of journalism practice. Literature search shows that not much research has been carried out to ascertain its influence on ideal journalism practice in Ebonyi State. That is what necessitated this study.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives are:

- i. to ascertain the level of knowledge of Ebonyi State Journalists on brown envelope syndrome.
- ii. to ascertain the areas brown envelope syndrome are made manifest in journalism practice in Ebonyi State.
- iii. to find out ways of achieving true professionalism in journalism practice in Ebonyi State.

Research Questions

The research questions are:

- i. what is the knowledge level of Ebonyi State Journalists on brown envelope syndrome?
- ii. what are the areas brown envelope syndrome manifest in journalism practice in Ebonyi State?
- iii. what are the ways of achieving true professionalism in journalism practice in Ebonyi State?

Conceptual Review

Brown Envelope

Nkwocha (2004,p.68) defines brown envelope as the “money given to reporters or editors to persuade them to write positive stories or kill a negative story...” It as a monetary bribe given to a journalist to pressurize him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants. In his contribution, Akabogu(2005,p.202) says that “Brown envelop refers to the form of gifts, drinks, food or money given in order to influence the judgment of a journalist.” For Akabogu, the practice stifles journalistic freedom in the exercise of professional judgment and evokes the idea of criminality in the minds of right-thinking people.

The journalist is seen as the watchdog of the society and should not collect money to discharge his duties. On the contrary, Asemah (2009) holds that journalists often collect money to perform their normal responsibilities of information dissemination. This implies that when a journalist collects money from the source before publishing his story, it may likely affect how he will report the story. Facts may be distorted or suppressed.

To Okunna (1995), brown envelopeis probably the commonest type of bribe in journalism, she sees it as a monetary bribe handed out to an unethical journalist to pressurize him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants, 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. Contributing to this, Akabogu (2005) says that brown envelope refers to the form of gifts, drinks, food or money given in order to influence the judgment of a journalist. By implication, this practice holds journalistic freedom to ransom thereby affecting his professional judgment and objectivity. Highlighting the existence of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism, Skjerdal (2010) opines that the term brown envelopeis

applied to denote a corrupt practice which involves transfer of various types of rewards from sources to journalists who are regarded as custodians of the truth. This, according to him, indicates neglect of ethical requirement of the journalism career as well as undermines the primary role of journalism. He further states, the exact origin of brown envelope is somewhat uncertain, but it may be very well stem from West Africa.

Adeyemi and Okorie (2010) in Okoro, and Chinweobo-Onuoha (2013) agree that the euphemism, Brown Envelope, originated from the practice among Ghanaians to discreetly enclose bribe money in envelope, not necessarily brown ones, rather than exposing it. While in the Nigerian perspective, Nwabueze (2010) says it has its root in the culture of presenting kola nuts to visitors, a hospitality practice common in many African societies.

Forms of Brown Envelope

The brown envelope syndrome has assumed different names owing to journalists' continuous indulgence in it. As noted earlier, these names include *keske*, *qua*, *gbalamu*, *chop*, better life, the-journalists are-going (See Adio, www.thisdayonline). Again, it comes in different forms so that some unsuspecting journalists may not know when they have dabbled into it. The common forms are; Junket, Okunna (1995,p.57)describes it as "one type of bribe, which is common in developed capitalist countries which involves a free trip that a publicity agent arranges for a reporter to cover an event with the hope of reaping a complimentary article from the reporter who accepts the junket." Ike(2005,p.122) describes it as "an expense-paid trip to permit a reporter to cover a story. It is often considered a bribe or special favour in journalism practice.Freebies is another form of brown envelope described by Ike (2005,p.88) as "a gratuity, usually tickets, passes, musical recordings or books given to journalists by people seeking press coverage". Again,brown envelope is also widely known in Nigeria as PR, which involves paying well in advance in order for an otherwise newsworthy event to be reported by journalists.Other forms are token of appreciation and kola etc.

Causes of Brown Envelope Syndrome

Poor remuneration is one of these causes. Although some journalists will always take bribe, majority of them indulge in such act because they are generally not well paid, even in the face of a lot of financial problems within and outside their working environment (Akabogu, 2005).

Advertisers have been known to influence news angles. Media owners, owing to the big revenue that accrue to them through advertising, consider the interests of advertisers, especially

in the packaging of sensitive news items that concern these advertisers, thereby violating the demands for social and ethical responsibilities. Corruption equally pose a serious threat and it is ravaging the entire fabrics of the Nigerian system, journalism profession inclusive. Other causes are personal greed, attitude of untrained and fake journalists among others.

Empirical Review

Nwabueze (2010) studied “Brown Envelope and the need for Ethical Re-orientation: Perception of Nigeria Journalist”. The objectives of the study was to find out from practicing journalists what their perception of brown envelope syndrome was and whether it has continued to exist in the profession. The study used survey research method to administer copies of the questionnaire to randomly selected journalists. The findings of the study among others are that the basic reason behind the continued existence of brown envelope in the profession is the orientation of journalists. The study also found out that most journalists said that nothing is wrong in accepting brown envelope. Based on the findings, the study recommended that the welfare of professional journalists should be improved to provoke change in their perception and attitude towards the acceptance of brown envelope. Again, it was recommended that sound education and professional training of journalists should be provided in order to dissuade journalists from collecting bribe.

Similarly, Okoro and Onuoha (2013) carried out a study on Journalists Perception of Brown Envelope Syndrome and its Implication for Journalists in Nigeria. The objective of the study was to examine journalists’ perception of brown envelope syndrome and its implication to journalism practice in Nigeria. The study surveyed some selected journalists as well as interviewed other journalism practitioners. It was found out in the study that ignoble practice influence journalism practice negatively as important issues are downplayed while unimportant ones are exaggerated in a bid to satisfy the givers of their brown envelope. It was recommended that media professional bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the industry by sanctioning defaulting journalists and by so doing, ensure highest professional conduct of members in all situations.

Again, Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe(2012) did a study on “the Nigeria Press, Brown Envelope Syndrome and Media Professionalism: the missing link”. The study evaluated media practitioners’ perception of brown envelope syndrome. The study employed combination of

interview with senior editors in chosen newspapers, observation of events in press conference and survey of practicing journalists in Lagos, Nigeria. The study found out that low capital base of the profession is the major reason for the continuous existence of brown *envelopism*. The study recommended that, to have a strong capital base in the profession, mergers and acquisition should be encouraged so that they can be strong capital base for the provision of workers welfare. It was also recommended that editorial policy about reward and gratifications has to be clear and distinctive so that media industries could apply sanction on 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 integrity of journalists to resist bribe in whatever form it comes.

These studies reviewed, discussed journalism perception of brown envelope syndrome and its implications on the profession. This present study is different because it centers on the influence of brown envelope syndrome on the practice of journalism in Ebonyi State. It was discovered that the studies were not anchored on any theory. This is wrong as studies of this nature need to be anchored on theories of the press just as this present study was anchored on Social Responsibility and Cognitive Development Theories.

Theoretical Anchorage

Two theories guided this study, Social Responsibility and the Cognitive Moral Development Theories.

Social Responsibility Theory

This theory was propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. The theory postulates that, the press is attached with freedom but must act responsible in carrying out fundamental functions of mass communication. McQuail (2005 p.172) encapsulates the basic tenets of the theory as follows: (i) the media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust. (ii) News from the media should be free but self-regulated. (iii) The media should adhere to certain stipulated codes/ethics in order to guide its practices (iv) and in some circumstances, government could intervene to defend the public interest.

An ideal journalist must be socially accountable to the audience. As Asemah (2011) puts it, when journalist enjoys press freedom, he should also remember that freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility. He should use his position as a journalist to inform, educate and socialize the audience and not using the media to cause problems. The ideal journalists, according to

Okoye (2007), must not use his power or that of his organization for selfish interest or unworthy interest. The journalist should not act irresponsibly in the course of carrying out his assignments. He should exercise caution to ensure that he does use the medium to further interest other than public good.

Cognitive Moral Development Theory

This theory was developed by Lawrence Kohlberg in 1981. The tenets of this theory are that (i) as people develop mentally, physically and emotionally, they develop a moral cognizance which helps them in thinking and decision making, (ii) there are stages of thinking and each stage is of greater maturity than the previous one, (iii) by delineating these stages, we are allowed to know and test our own thinking and decision making thereby helping us know ourselves better and challenges us to move to a higher level of thinking. Juxtaposing this study with the theories, a journalist is expected to shield himself from gratification as this could disrupt his sense of social responsibility which calls for objectivity, fairness and adherence to codes of ethics guiding his practices. He ought to play the watchdog roles, rather than a pet dog who accepts whatever is given to him in order to entwine a story. Also as journalists grow in the field of journalism, they should develop a positive attitude and mindset towards their profession. They should be guided in their decision making of collecting bribe as advocated by the Cognitive Development Theory.

Method

The survey research method was used. The population comprised of 296 Journalists registered under Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Ebonyi State chapter. Census method was used to study all the elements in the population. Purposive sampling was used to administer the questionnaire to the journalists.

Results

Table One: Level of knowledge of Ebonyi State Journalists on Brown Envelope Syndrome.

Category of Opinion/Options	Frequency	Percentage
All journalists are aware of brown envelope syndrome	100	34
Many journalists are aware of brown envelope syndrome	100	34
Few journalists are aware of brown envelope syndrome	96	32
No journalist is aware of brown envelope syndrome	0	0.0
Total	296	100%

Source: Iroh's field work, 2022

Majority of the respondents are aware that the brown envelope syndrome exists in the profession.

Table Two: Areas Brown Envelope Syndrome Manifest in Journalism Practice in Ebonyi State.

Category of Opinion/Options	Frequency	Percentage
Through public relations	68	23
Through news sourcing and reporting	98	33
Through press Conference	50	17
Through Interview sessions	55	19
Through documentaries	25	8
Total	296	100%

Source: Iroh's field work, 2022

Majority of the respondents believe that brown envelope syndrome manifest in journalism activities like public relations, news sourcing and reporting, press conference, interviews and documentaries

Table Three: Ways of achieving true Professionalism in Journalism Practice in Ebonyi State.

Category of Opinion/Options	Frequency	Percentage
Through sound education and professional training	120	41
Through Improved packages	85	29
Through favourable working environment	91	30
Total	296	100%

Source: Iroh’s field work, 2022

From the table above, 120(41%) respondents suggested that sound education and professional training of journalists will help achieve true professionalism and curb brown envelope syndrome. Others are of the opinion that improved packages and favourable working environment of journalists will help achieve true professionalism and reduce brown envelopism.

Findings

Majority of journalists are aware that brown envelope syndrome exists in the profession. This finding is in line with Nkwocha (2004, p.68) who says that “It is an open secret today that journalists openly demand for bribe known variously as brown envelope, last paragraph, media by media better life, full stop and who no dey no dey”.Brown envelope syndrome has become a common practice in the profession. This findings corroborates Ekerikevwe (2009) assertion that brown envelope is common in journalism practice because journalists always demand for bribe and other forms of gratification before they cover any event or even publish stories from such events.Brown envelope syndrome manifests in journalism activities like public relations, news sourcing and reporting, press conferences, interviews and documentaries. This is in line with Okoro and Onuoha (2003) when they said that brown envelope syndrome manifests itself in all areas of journalism practice. For instance, getting journalist to cover events has long required an informal payment of some sort.Sound education and professional training of journalists will help in achieving true professionalism and curb brown envelope syndrome.

Recommendations

In line with the findings, the following recommendations were made;

Since majority of journalists are aware of brown envelope in the profession, media professional bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the industry by sanctioning defaulting journalists that engage in this ugly act. For instance, NUJ in Ebonyi State should ensure that media practitioners adhere to laid down code of practice. The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and other media professional bodies should ensure that there is real unionism in the profession by ensuring that journalists' rights are not trampled upon. These bodies should also put in place a mechanism for the negotiation of a better pay package for journalists so that they will not be tempted to collect bribe as it is common in the profession. Journalists should adhere strictly to the ethics of the profession that frowns at collecting bribe and other gratifications from journalism practices like PR, commentary, interviews etc. Sound education and professional training of journalists should be provided this will serve as a good antidote for solving the problem of brown envelope. The acquisition of sound education has a way of giving the journalist a self-worth, which makes him look beyond unlawful avenues of getting gratifications and ethical training and socialization of the journalists will readily expose them to the inherent pitfalls that are associated with the acceptance of brown envelope and the need to resist the urge.

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