

## **Bribes and Gifts at the Intersection of Professional Ethics and Social Reality: A Media Professional's Dilemma**

**Saheed Olurotimi TIMEHIN.**

Department of Foreign Languages, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos NIGERIA

### **Abstract**

*Contemporary media practice has, since its evolution, faced a myriad of problems. The dimensions, magnitude and depth of these problems have engaged scholars from different backgrounds and orientations for decades. The nature of the profession itself gives whatever is related to it a cosmopolitan complexity that imposes upon it a cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary tenor. This paper examines the phenomenon of bribe or gift-taking vis a vis the social realities in human society as one of the major ethical challenges of media practice in modern times. It approaches ethics as practical normative activity aimed at solving problems, entrenching values and enabling human beings to co-exist peacefully as individuals and societies. Using content analysis as a tool of inquiry, the paper posits that given the media's role in society, and considering its nature as a confluence of diverse orientations, the preponderance of the bribery and gift-taking as well as the narrow lines between them is a social challenge having its roots in the discourse on social injustice, personal and social integrity, communal cohesion as well as industrial and labour laws; and that media professionals can only be empowered to adequately distinguish and make pragmatic choices between bribes and gifts if the government and other stakeholders do not eliminate or subdue the socio-political and psychosocial currents that not only make corruption attractive, but also at times, coerce professionals into submission.*

**Keywords:** Bribe, Ethics, Gift, Media, Social Injustice.

### **Introduction**

Media practice across the globe faces similar challenges and practitioners encounter identical hazards. Though contexts may differ, the ideational content of their experiences remains the same. Because of the similarity of experience, ethical challenges are also strikingly similar. The phenomenon of collecting bribes or gifts is universal, though motives and purposes may differ. Since ethics is primarily concerned with what constitutes correct conduct and virtuous character and what does not, (Brahmbhatt, 2016) it is necessary to reflect on the epistemology of professional ethics as an aspect of applied ethics within the general matrix of ethical philosophy.

Because of its complex relativity, this study does not explore the philosophical definitions of ethics and the multiple approaches that abound in academic tradition. It rather focuses on professional ethics which seeks to define, clarify, amplify and deconstruct professional activity and its values. Sociologically, professions are grouped by the peculiarity of their members' expertise and their service ideal. This service ideal is related to the morality that defines norms, attitudes, goals and social responsibility and public expectations of their work. There are known service ideals associated with all professions and the success of members of a given profession can be analyzed, measured and criticized by these ideals which in most cases form a part of the training of people in the profession.

The ethics of a profession thus provide a behavioural code which embraces imperatives and prohibitions in line with the operational focus of the work group. The meaning of 'ethics' is therefore constructed within the group, and depending on the nature and size of a group, morality is particularized as members of the group view it in an occupational sense as a code that guides their workplace behaviour. (Herbenstreit et al, 2017). Professional ethics thus inspire ethical reflection as it asks questions about how workers should function ethically, that is, in right conduct and in accordance with the vision and mission of the profession even if it means performing a task that may require turning a blind eye to personal benefits, accepting a life of poverty or enduring persecution. According to Ward (2007), this kind of reflection is normative reasoning in social practice. It is broad and ever-expanding as it also covers how people reappraise, balance or modify their principles in the face of new challenges, novel ideas, new technologies, and new social conditions.

In light of the above, ethics in Media practice is a practical activity that addresses how media professionals act in the discharge of their duties. (Black et al, 1999). Questions relating to whether journalists can accept gifts while discharging their duties, interpret issues in favour of a friend, relative, patron or organization, distort realities to promote the image of a known crook, reveal sources of information to security personnel, or probe the allegation of misconduct against a popular and much-admired politician are all ethical concerns.

### **Literature Review**

There is no dearth of works on general ethics, media ethics, bribery and corruption or gift-taking. Numerous works have been done with particular reference to particular contexts on each of these issues. For instance, Hebenstreit Gernot, Alexandra Marics, and Jim Hlavac in their work, 'Professional Ethics and Professional Conduct' examined the concept of morality and ethics. They argued that ethics entails appropriate and responsible behaviour within a given profession. Though the study was primarily applied to asylum service providers, it contains principles that are applicable to other professions. It identifies basic ethical values at the primary level and at the secondary level it identifies moral values and commercial values. The study is significant in that it contains a section on dilemma which it defines as an unavoidable conflict between values and duties

In "A Textbook on Professional Ethics and Human Values by Nagarazaan, the emphasis is on being human and all the attributes the author believes should form a part of the ethical values of a balanced human being. It is suitable as a textbook of general ethics though it contains the code of conduct documents of some professional bodies in India.

Timo Airaksinen, in his 'Philosophy of Professional Ethics', gave a brief introduction to professional ethics as an aspect of applied ethics. It proposes a typology and explores the sociological dimensions of the issues raised. Arun P. Matthew and C. Pichandy, in their study on 'Media Professionals' Perception on Bribe and Corruption' noted that the phenomenon of bribery and corruption in media practice is global. The study examined primarily the phenomenon among Indian media professionals. Peikai Li, Jian-Min Sunb, and Toon W. Taris tried to make a distinction between bribes and gifts in their work 'Differentiating between gift giving and bribing in China: a guanxi perspective'. They attempted to clarify the cultural dimensions of gift giving particularly the Chinese practice of guanxi.

Timothy Fort and James Noone, in their celebrated work 'Gifts, Bribes, and Exchange: Relationships in Non-Market Economies and Lessons for Pax E-Commercia' adopted a multidisciplinary approach to the subject. Bribes and gifts are deconstructed and the discourse is structured in a way that the past is connected with the present. They also proposed the Trobriand model as a way out of the dialectical quagmire that is often encountered in the bribe or gift debate.

While Taye C. Obateru and Jimi Kayode in their respective works, 'The Socio-cultural Dynamics and 'Survival Struggle' in Professional Journalism Practice in Nigeria', and 'Journalism Ethics in Nigeria' gave localized particularistic expression of the whole discourse with particular reference to Nigeria, underscoring the peculiarity of the Nigerian society and the workability of journalism ethics in a country battling with a self-imposed jaundiced superstructure.

### **Bribe and Gift: The Issues, the Challenge and the Dilemma**

Historically, bribes and gifts have been known in human business relations and social intercourse. While gifts are primarily seen as a means of expressing gratitude and inspiring reciprocity, bribes have been associated with corruption and illicit practices. Bribery is globally condemned as the most visible manifestation of corruption, even if not all nations have official sanctions against it. According to Philip Nichols (1999), all nations and every major religion in the world abhor the practice of bribery. Transnational organizations and non-governmental organizations, such as Transparency International, have also publicly censured nations where corruption is high (Fort T.L. & Janes N, 2000).

Gifts, on the other hand, are shrouded in an epistemological mist. While small gifts may not portend more than appreciation, grandiose gifts invoke such feeling of reciprocity which subtly suggests a request for special favour, preferential treatment or something else in return. In Media practice, particularly in Nigeria, several sociocultural and psycho-strategic factors affect the proper deconstruction of the nature of gift and bribe and the line between them. According to Obateru (2017), research has shown that journalists in Nigeria

face various challenges among which are poor or irregular salaries, personal and job insecurity, oppressive conditions of service, inadequate working environment, and predatorial influence of media proprietors. These have largely prevented them from being able to abide by the ideals of the Fourth Estate theory of upholding the truth and serving as the conscience of society (Pate, 2011).

Some Nigerian journalists have also been accused of succumbing to financial inducements to produce or suppress stories, promote bias, ethno-religious interests, and the fabricate reports, particularly of political activities and social conflicts (Suraj, 2013), and these are glaring from the dearth of in-depth investigative report on major conflicts. The Boko-Haram saga does not seem to have been adequately covered as media organizations do not seem to want to commit resources to investigative journalism in conflict zones as evidenced by the coverage of the abduction of the Chibok girls. This may be because they are compromised and are ready to enjoy the patronage of anyone who can buy their services as Golwa (2011) suggested, or as Idowu (2014) opined, that they are sworn to a journalism of convenience, or that they have lost the vibrancy of the pre-democracy era as Omoera (2010) asserted, or because of the fear of threats to life, imprisonment and proscriptions as Daramola (2006) averred.

From the above, it can be seen that bribery in media practice is an issue of much concern and despite its being widely condemned, the desire of those who give bribes to gain unfair advantage and the desire of the bribed media professional to fill economic 'gaps', whether situationally imposed by poor remuneration or internally driven by personal greed are almost irresistibly compelling. In the face of these desires, the line between bribe and gift becomes thinner and more shrouded in ambiguity, a fact which makes a deconstruction of the connotations of both terms a desideratum.

Bribery can be defined as the offering of or an attempt to offer something of value to an individual or company in return for an illegal action or favour (Kircher et al, 2008). According to Bello (2014), it refers to the act in which a person offers, promises, or gives another person a financial or other type of advantage, with the intention of inducing that person to engage in unethical behaviour. Similarly, Morrow (2016) defined bribery as something of value given with the intent of influencing the judgment or conduct of a person in a position of trust. According to Boles (2015), bribery can be conceptually grouped into "active" and "passive" bribery. Active bribery refers to an offer, promise or giving of a bribe while the acceptance or agreement to accept it is passive.

Bribery, in many ways, overlaps with the gift-giving culture. (Aydın et al., 2020). Several scholars have attempted to use diverse lens to locate the difference between these two concepts. While some have used the legal lens (Bello, 2014), and ethico-cultural lens (Steidlmeier, 1999), others have used the lens of motivation and intent for giving (Fritzsche, 2005). It is instructive to observe that the cultural angle tends to be somewhat more complex. How do we approach a situation where the gift at the middle of an ambiguous exchange is culturally inspired and encouraged? The practice of customary gift-giving when visiting a traditional ruler or leader in many African communities as well as the Chinese custom of guanxi (gift-giving for interpersonal connections that create obligations

for a continued exchange of favours), are relevant here. This is particularly more problematic in the Chinese culture, as *guanxi* is historically and religiously instituted in the ethics of Confucianism (Katerina, 2015).

Gift-giving is a global ethic. Gift includes any gratuity, favour, discount, entertainment, hospitality, loan, or other item having monetary value. It includes services as well as gifts of training, transportation, local travel, lodgings and meals, whether provided in-kind, by purchase of a ticket, payment in advance, or reimbursement after the expense has been incurred but excluding greeting cards and items with little intrinsic value, such as plaques, certificates, and trophies, which are intended primarily for presentation. (Morrow, 2016)

Whether given in a social or official situation, what distinguishes gift from bribe is the intent. Yet the intent and motivation when culturally constructed may have deep and unfathomable spiritual connotations beyond the socioeconomic visions of the bribery debate. Anthropologically, cultural pluralism is a reality of the post-modern world and one reality may have multiple manifestations and perceptions of the truth. In parts of Africa, Asia, and among the Native American tribes and the aborigines of Australia as well as the Māori of New Zealand, and among pre-market communities, gift-giving may not only be social but also have a trans-earthly reference. (Marcel Mauss, 1990).

Some authorities have also argued that nothing is a gift. Their position is that contemporary business space is dominated by maximization of self-interest. Some economists, such as Oliver Williamson (1975) characterize human behaviour as opportunistic and self-interest seeking. Thought of in terms of economic self-interest, gifts taken, whether in cash or kind, may be seen as benefitting the "self". In other words, a media professional who takes gifts in any form may be servicing the "self" above the duty.

Whether in Civil Service or in the Media, the professional duty is at the heart of legal-rational activity and every action of the civil servant or media professional should gravitate towards the fulfilment the duty. The sad reality however is that, not only in the third world nations, even in the developed countries, salaries of many civil servants are comparatively low, (Agyena, 2019) and this is also very true of media. The absence or inadequate delivery of social justice which this represents will no doubt make illicit behaviour attractive particularly when incompetent favour seeking patrons come knocking. If the system does not take care of an individual, it is the system that ultimately suffers as the service for which the individual is employed and poorly paid becomes monopolized by him and will only be delivered if his palm is rubbed.

There are times gifts come in form of sponsorship, free holiday or free hotel service at a patron's outlet. It becomes even more sophisticated when a media professional is invited to enjoy those services together with his principal, the owner of the media organisation he works for. What is the ethical thing to do? He can guess fairly well the intention behind the invitation. His watchdog instinct is surely up for sale. What happens to a journalist if the person negotiating for a suppression of news about a corrupt politician is his employer? What happens to media professionals if the employer is a media owner with

vested interests? The questions are endless and they put the media professional in a dilemma.

In order to combat the scourge of bribery and ambiguous gift-taking, it is necessary to assert that unless a multisectoral approach is adopted the situation cannot change in the nearest future. This is because it is a social challenge which cannot just be wished away with political and legislative fiat. It has its roots in the absence of social injustice and in the educational systems that determine the presence or otherwise of personal and social integrity in people. It is also connected with the effectiveness of industrial and labour laws in a country and how the rights and wellbeing of professionals are protected.

Governments should be conscious of the sensitivity of media practice and its importance to the national development. The political will to change the situation should reflect in policies; in basic infrastructures- in health care delivery, in value-driven educational policies; in closing the doors of short cuts; in making basic services cheap and accessible and in building strong law enforcement structure capable of curtailing the rebellious instinct in the citizenry.

An interim way out is for media practitioners, rather than resorting to bribery which undermines the smooth running of the state, they could adopt moonlighting but on the condition that it will not lead to conflict of interests. Moonlighting is the second or third job taken up by employees for a variety of reasons (Kanyane, 2005). Journalists and other media workers may explore the many opportunities that abound for moonlighting which may not necessarily affect their core professional duties. As Yehiel Limor and Itai Himelboim (2006, p. 267) observe: "Journalists may choose to engage in a variety of additional activities, such as political engagements, working in advertising and public relations, and performing educational and celebrity-type activities such as interviews". Though some moonlighting opportunities may be prone to lead to a conflict of interest, several opportunities exist in the society and through the new technologies that do not pose a conflict of interest nor undermine professional and ethical standards in any way (Lo et al., 2005, p. 159).

Because they live by the word, media professionals can engage in a number of activities to earn extra allowances that may make the taking of bribe less attractive. They can do online English language classes, or classes in other subjects; they can also direct ceremonies as masters of ceremony, serve as repertoire at social and academic events and freelance writers. Similarly, there are individuals that give out writing contracts and pay fairly well.

## **Conclusion**

This brief study has so far examined issues surrounding bribery and gift giving with a view to establishing the causative factors that necessitate bribe taking among media professionals. The dilemma they face as well the almost helpless situations to which they are exposed any time there is a conflict between their professional ethics, societal influences and official duties are also underscored. It has become glaring that no matter how often ethical codes and principles are sung, if they are not accompanied by a total, purpose-driven intervention which must be multisectoral, multidimensional and

multifaceted, the scourge of bribe among media professionals may remain fixed in an eternal cadence.

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#### **Biographical Note**

**Saheed Olurotimi TIMEHIN**, *PhD.*, is a Lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos NIGERIA. Email: saheedot@yahoo.com, saheed.timehin@lasu.edu.ng.