

# **BROWN ENVELOPE SYNDROME AND THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Brown Envelope syndrome has become a common practice among Nigerian journalists. Consequently, residents of Nigeria, and even the international community, are fast losing faith in the mass media, a situation that threatens the future of journalism in the country. However, the various journalism codes of ethics shows brown envelope to be unethical – something that unprofessional, greedy, corrupt, poorly-paid, and fake journalists, who succumb to pressures from moneybags and advertisers, indulge in. But the disturbing laxity of the Nigerian journalism regulatory bodies worsens the current situation. Thus, if the Brown Envelope syndrome is not checked, principally by reversing its root causes and self-regulation by the Nigerian press, the different media of communication in the country will soon be completely compromised by people that only want to advance their selfish interests.*

## **KEYWORDS**

**Brown Envelope:** a situation where a journalist accepts gratification from news sources or potential news sources.

**Syndrome:** actions that are characteristic of a particular condition.

**Journalism:** the work of collecting, writing and publishing material in newspapers and magazines or on television and radio.

**Freebies:** gratifications given to journalists by publicity seekers.

**Junket:** an all-expenses-paid trip that someone or an organization offers a journalist in order to get a favourable report.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In an article he captioned “Settlement Culture and the Nigerian Media”, Waziri Adio, a former managing director of the *New Nigerian Newspapers*, writes that on April 15, 2002, the *Time* magazine published a story about Nigeria entitled “The Whole Truth”, which raised fundamental issues regarding journalism ethics in the country. Written by Stephen Faris, the story alleged that the office of the Minister of

Information and Orientation, Professor Jerry Gana, gave foreign journalists reference materials on Nigeria and some brown envelopes containing \$400 each after a press conference. The story further alleged that the minister's gesture was aimed at bribing and pacifying some foreign journalists that were in the habit of carrying uninformed and sensational stories on Nigeria.

Adio notes that although the federal government, headed by Mr. Olusegun Obasanjo, set up a panel to probe the allegation, the panel did not indict the official involved; making the then Minister of Justice and the Attorney General of the Federation, Mr. Kanu Agabi, to say that the story should have been more appropriately entitled "The Whole Lie". Agabi said the gift of N50,000 to the foreign journalists was a normal thing, even among international media organisations.

Adio, however, has a view contrary to Agabi's understanding of the incident:

As if this was not bad enough, Nigerian newspaper editorials, cartoons and columns have been making the specious argument that this is another instance of Western media bias and fixation with negative news from Africa. Perhaps fired by patriotism, perhaps motivated by embarrassment, Nigerian journalists have dumped their critical faculties on this issue. The press has chorused: this is not bribery, such practices abound even in the western world, everyone does it etc., etc.

I had hoped that someone would be able to think outside the box and ahead of the pack in this instance. I pined for the contrarian view that should be the hallmark of a plural press. I am yet to come across one. And this is where the real danger lies: that we have come to the day that nearly everyone sees nothing untoward in the action of the government and the journalists who accepted the so-called honoraria. Everyone thinks this is standard practice in journalism.

This incident and others like it call for a critical examination of the *brown envelope* syndrome, with a view to ascertaining if it truly has a legitimate place in the practice of journalism in Nigeria and indeed, anywhere in the world. What follows, therefore, is a treatise of the *brown envelope* syndrome and its debilitating impact on the future of journalism in the country.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

What is known as *Brown Envelope* in Nigeria today is a fall out of one of the political theories of the press called the Libertarian Theory. The theory came as an improvement on the already existing Authoritarian Theory. In its basic form, the libertarian theory advocates that the press should be completely free to publish what it likes. However, as a result of the complete freedom exercised by the press of the twentieth century, serious aberrations and deviations found their way into the practice of journalism. The abuse of this freedom had given rise to such negative journalistic practices as yellow journalism, sensationalism and character assassination (Okunna, 1995). Ekeh (2007:23) also notes that the press, as a result near absolute freedom, "revel in yellow journalism, blackmail and the 'brown envelop'[sic] syndrome." And for Akabogu (2005:202) the term, *brown envelope*, "...is derived from the underworld business of wrapping of wares in brown envelop[sic]."

Today, the *brown envelope* syndrome constitutes a powerful tool for making journalists indulge in the other unethical practices of journalism. For instance, pressure, which has been known to be one of the ways of getting a journalist to err in his ethical obligations, translates to monetary inducement, which is bribery, and

of course, a major tool of the *brown envelope* syndrome. It is, therefore, logical to infer that *brown envelope* as the common name of monetary gifts and other inducements to a journalist is so called because the bribe givers understood that what they were doing was wrong, and in order to shield it from the public glare, inserted the objects of inducement in brown envelopes, which were quite opaque, so that the unsuspecting onlooker might never know the contents of the brown envelopes.

However, 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 without demanding undue favour, making it little wonder that it is referred to as “the controversial brown envelop[sic] (Nkwocha 2004:68); a position that Waziri Adio corroborates when he opines:

Nigerian journalism is not just a profession where anything goes, it is now one of the bastions of corruption in the country. It is a supreme irony that this is a profession that is supposed to unearth corruption and one that takes itself seriously. It is an open secret today that Nigerian journalists openly demand bribes known variously as brown envelope, keske, qua, gbalamu, chope, better life, the-journalists-are-going etc. Reporters and editors seek sponsored trips. Editors and publishers unabashedly sell their pages, becoming megaphones of their sponsors, framing individual struggles in public-spirited terms ([www.thisdayonline.info/archive](http://www.thisdayonline.info/archive)).

### **3. BROWN ENVELOPE DEFINED**

Nkwocha (2004:68) defines *Brown Envelope* as the “money given to reporters or editors to persuade them to write positive stories or kill a negative story...” He emphasised that the unethical trend is widely practised by reporters who demand it as a right; a situation that portrays the *brown envelope* syndrome as a journalism convention rather than a condemnable act. For Okunna (1995:57), while describing *brown envelope* as probably the commonest type of bribe in journalism, defines it as “a monetary bribe handed out to an unethical journalist to pressurize him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants.” She adds 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.” In his contribution, Akabogu (2005:202) says that “Brown envelop[sic] 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 judgement and evokes the idea of criminality in the minds of right-thinking people.

### **4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The social responsibility theory of the press came as an improvement on the libertarian theory. It believes that freedom comes with concomitant obligation. Thus the press should be responsible to the society by ensuring that the essential functions of mass communication are carried out. In other words, the theory serves as a means of calling the press to order, especially as it was beginning to abuse the unrestrained freedom the libertarian theory afforded it. Thus Ojobor (2002), citing McQuail (1987:117-118), notes, among other provisions, that the social responsibility theory advocates “That media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities.” Therefore, the idea of self-regulation against ethical and social irresponsibility, which the *brown envelope*

syndrome constitutes, was a direct tenet of the social responsibility theory. It is the idea of self-regulation that made journalists to come up with codes of ethics that guide their day-to-day activities.

## 5. *BROWN ENVELOPE* AND THE JOURNALISM CODES OF ETHICS

The *brown envelope* syndrome is frowned upon, because, like every other profession, journalism has rules and regulations governing its practice. These rules and regulations are generally called ethics. In journalism, ethics means the code of morals that journalists are supposed to uphold (Ike, 2005:75-76). To underscore the importance of ethical obligations in journalism, it is pertinent to cite (from Ewelukwa 2004:282-283) the international, regional and national codes of ethics that condemn the *brown envelope* syndrome, starting with the international code, which is code-named *The Journalist's Professional Integrity*, and forms article IV of the international code: "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." Also regionally, the charter of the West African Journalists' Association, WAJA, in its Article X, condemns the *brown envelope* syndrome thus: "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 well being." Again, nationally, the portion of the Nigerian Press Organisation, NPO, that deals with the *brown envelope* syndrome is code-named *Reward and Gratification*, and it states 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."

From the above codes, it is clearly seen that the *brown envelope* syndrome has no legitimate place in the practice of journalism anywhere in the world.

## 6. FORMS OF *BROWN ENVELOPE*

Expectedly, the *brown envelope* syndrome has assumed different names owing to journalists' continuous indulgence in it. As noted earlier, these names include *keske*, *qua*, *gbalamu*, *chope*, *better life*, *the-journalists-are-going* (Adio, [www.thisdayonline](http://www.thisdayonline)). Again, it comes in different forms so that some unsuspecting journalists may not know when they have dabbled in it. The common forms are:

**Junket:** Okunna (1995:57), citing Sandman *et al*, describes junket 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 in the hope of reaping a complimentary article from the reporter who accepts the junket." Ike (2005:122) describes it as "an expense-paid trip to permit a reporter to cover a story. Often considered a bribe or special favour in journalism practice."

**Freebies:** Ike (2005:88), describes freebies as "a gratuity, usually tickets, passes, musical recordings or books given to journalists by people seeking press coverage."

**PR:** The *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.

**Token of Appreciation:** The *brown envelope* syndrome also comes in the form of a token of appreciation, as it were. It is often out of proportion with its reason, which suggests that it is given in order to gain undue favour as against a reward for deserving journalists.

**Kola:** This is another name for the unacceptable attitude of offering unethical journalists bribe money in order to cajole them into indulging in unprofessional conducts that undermines their integrity.

## 7. CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE *BROWN ENVELOPE* SYNDROME IN NIGERIAN JOURNALISM

### Causes:

**Poor remuneration:** Although some journalists will always take bribe money, the great majority of journalists take bribe money 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).

**Influence of Advertisers:** 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. Folarin (1998:92), underscores this point when he asserts:

Since the commercial press is so dependent on advertising revenues, the tendency of the press to demur to the feelings of the advertisers, especially big advertisers, is understandable. Advertisers are known to exercise considerable influence over the news purveyed by the media they patronize, especially over news that have to do with such advertisers' propositions.

**Corruption:** The problem of corruption, which is ravaging the entire fabrics of the Nigerian system, has unfortunately made Nigerian journalists to demand unnecessary gratifications. Waziri Adio aptly condemns this malady when he writes that "Nigerian journalism is not just a profession where anything goes, it is now one of the bastions of corruption in the country" (www.thisdayonline).

**Personal greed:** The average Nigerian's uncontrolled quest to amass wealth has greatly corrupted the practice of journalism in the country. Macebuh (1987:69), while writing on the responsibilities of the press, captures the scenario thus:

It is not a matter of ideology. One does not have to be a rabid capitalist or a red-eyed socialist to admit, simply as a matter of objective fact, that the unbridled pursuit of personal wealth inevitably leads to monstrous injustice in society.

**Attitude of untrained journalists:** Until recently, journalism in Nigeria was an all-comers affair, so that anybody who could fairly write was employed as a journalist. But 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.

**Fake journalists:** There is the problem of fake journalists who go into journalism practice not because they like the profession but because they want to make quick money, mostly by blackmails. They also desire the popularity that comes with journalism. This category of journalists has been known to embrace *brown envelope* unashamedly.

**Laxity of journalism regulatory bodies:** The Nigerian Union of Journalists, NUJ, the Nigerian Guild of Editors, NGE, and the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria, NPAN, are the major stakeholders in the regulation of journalism practice in Nigeria, but they have not done more than formulating a plethora of codes, which are not enforced. Writing on the inefficiency of the various journalism regulatory bodies, Adio, again, notes that:

Though the Nigerian Union of Journalists, NUJ, and the Nigerian Guild of Editors, NGE, have codes of ethics and they frown at inducement and gratification, what we are seeing in Nigerian journalism today is a total

collapse of morality. There is no vigorous debate about issues such as relationship to sources, fairness and balance, sensationalism, privacy, obscenity, and gratification even among editors ([www.thisdayonline](http://www.thisdayonline)).

**Pressure from moneybags:** Because of the journalists' enormous power to confer status and to bring dishonour to any defaulter of the societal norms and practices, they are constantly under pressure to avoid doing the latter, and when they succumb to these pressures, it becomes unprofessional on their part. Commenting on this, Professor C.S Okunna, says, in a *Cosmo FM* radio programme, that there is "Too much pressure from those who have money – the politicians, they prevent journalists' reports from being ethically-oriented."

### **Effects:**

- The *brown envelope* syndrome has brought a shift from the traditional watchdog role of journalism to a publicity-seeking outlet available to the highest bidders in the society.
- It has also tarnished the reputation of journalists, so that they are often referred to as hungry press boys.
- *Brown envelope* has also resulted in what Macebuh (1987:71) calls the martyrdom syndrome, which "is that state of mind in which an otherwise sensible reporter deliberately sets out to use language whose vulgarity is not only offensive, but in fact reflects a moral distortion whose most recognizable character is the self-evident desire to be noticed by the authorities...it comes in form of commentary, and the commentary often addresses itself not to issues, but to persons and to the question whether they are stupid or foolish or corrupt."
- It also demeans the journalists' professional integrity and compromises the channel of communication (Nkwocha, 2004).
- With the *brown envelope* syndrome comes a worrisome disregard for objectivity, balance, accuracy and truth, which form the soul of journalism. "It puts objectivity in reporting at stake as far as the journalist is concerned because he may not report the facts of the news" (Akabogu, 2005:203).
- There is also the problem of loss of patronage, which naturally impacts negatively on the income of the press organization. This is true because advertisers seldom patronize media outlets with credibility crisis, yet advertising is the major source of income to the media.

## **8. PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO THE *BROWN ENVELOPE* SYNDROME**

No matter how badly journalism has fared in Nigeria, largely due to the disrepute brought to it by the cancerous *brown envelope*, there is still hope of a reversal of the ugly trend. The dignity and glamour of journalism in Nigeria could still be restored, especially by adopting the following steps:

**Sound education and professional training of journalists:** This is 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. Ethically-oriented 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. Writing on the benefit of good education of the journalist as a deterrent to *brown envelope*, Okunna (1995:73-74) submits that "A high status could ultimately make a journalist a more ethical professional because the visibility arising from this attribute could engender in the journalist the conviction that he/she has a name to protect."

**Improved pay package for journalists:** It is a common knowledge that a great percentage of journalists fall prey to monetary inducements because they are not well paid, even when their job is a daunting and risky

one. This makes them susceptible to easy lobby by members of the society. Should media owners increase the pay package of the journalists, starting with the cub reporters, the incidence of brown envelope will be reduced.

**Economic independence of the press:** The press, especially the privately-owned media organizations, should endeavour to enrich its content in order to constantly generate more money from sales and subscriptions instead of a continuous dependence on advertisements. The electronic media can also curtail the undue influence of advertisers by venturing into other sources of revenues like events management. Any media outfit that enriches its content will not have problems attracting and making advertisers abide by ethical demands, and thus the media outlet will avoid anything that could amount to *brown envelope*.

**Favourable working environment:** Akabogu (2005:204), citing Okunna writes that “Media employers should be encouraged to create good working environment that will enable the journalists to function as ethical professionals. To create such working environment, employers should not force newspaper journalists to produce copy that serves their ideologies and prejudices, to ‘hype’ their copy by spicing it with rumours and innuendoes.”

**Regular seminars, lectures and workshops for journalists:** The unethical deviation to bribery is sometimes seen as a temptation that befalls the journalists whenever they tend to forget its inherent dangers. To make sure that they are adequately equipped to shake off this temptation, the various regulatory bodies in journalism should organize periodic seminars, public lectures and workshops with a view to sensitizing and enlightening journalists on the emerging forms of *brown envelopes* and how to avoid it. Writing on this view, Akabogu (2005:204), citing Okunna, notes that through “the organization of regular workshops, seminars and public lectures by the Nigerian Press Council, NPC, and other bodies such as Proprietors’ Association of Nigeria, NPAN, the journalists would be sensitized into maintaining ethical conducts in the discharge of their duties.”

**Enforceable and justifiable codes by the Nigerian Press Council, NPC:** Numerous criticisms have travailed the inability of the Nigerian Press Council, NPC, and its other bodies to wake up to the need for strict enforcement of their otherwise elaborate codes, which merely exist just for the want of codes, but are not applied for efficient self-regulation. Until the bodies responsible for ensuring high ethical and professional standards in Nigerian journalism start setting precedents for the trial of cases of *brown envelope*, there may never be any hope of reviving the country’s corrupted journalism.

**Effective media relations instead of unethical lobbies:** Nkwocha (2004:60-61) notes that:

Media Relations is the branch of public relations, which establishes and maintains mutual understanding, goodwill and cooperation between an organization/individual and the mass media, the media owners and media practitioners including reporters, photo journalists, correspondents, editors, publishers and electronic media owners... Through effective media relations practices, the public relations executive or manager is able to relate well with the journalists and their bosses on behalf of the organization/client... In times of crisis such as industrial unrest, boardroom wrangling, fraud, scandals, product defects, industrial accidents etc, it is the job of media relations to effectively manage the information that goes to the media.

The above, according to Nkwocha, is better than “physical cash that demeans their [journalists] integrity and compromises the channel of communication.”

**The will say “No!”:** Journalists who constitute a social and cultural influence in helping to form attitudes, to establish values and to develop a climate for change (Odunewu, 1978) should know the right from the wrong

and should always summon the courage to say “no” when they are being induced or lobbied to indulge in unprofessional conducts. Speaking on *The Press in Nigeria* in *Cosmo FM* radio, Enugu, Prof. C.S Okunna asserts that “Courage, courage, courage” should be the journalists’ watchword.

## 9. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

So far in this paper, we have seen how the evil of *brown envelope* has militated against credible journalism practice in Nigeria, necessitating the lamentations of concerned scholars. For instance, Mohammed Haruna, while writing on *The Media and 2003* in the *Daily Trust* newspaper, regrets that the “...critical press has behaved largely as the lapdog of those in authority instead of being society’s watchdog...” This is as a result of the corruption of journalism as evidenced in the seemingly enigmatic *brown envelope* syndrome. Also writing on *Settlement Culture and the Nigerian Media*, Waziri Adio equally laments that “it is a supreme irony that this is a profession that is supposed to unearth corruption and one that takes itself seriously.” And for Macebuh (1987:69&71), “the Press in Nigeria can never properly claim to be discharging any significant responsibility if it fails to consistently describe, if not denounce, the countless ways in which the pursuit of wealth corrupts the polity and compromises our future.” He further questions: “Is it any wonder, then, that all too often we are unable to enjoy public sympathy for our travails as journalists, or that public officials see us as a bunch of irresponsible trouble-makers who must be compelled to abide by the ordinary constraints of citizenship?”

The high level of ethical decadence in Nigerian journalism has also prompted Udeze, as cited in Aliede (2005:138-139), to make the following passionate submission:

People should be re-oriented towards regarding truth and honesty as virtues worth imbibing. They should be made to understand that the cash they take to tell lies is like the Biblical Esau that took porridge from his brother Jacob and sold a very wonderful opportunity of being the father of the world. It is throwing away their tomorrow for today and it is a crime against God and against self.

All these are voices of reason, which Nigerian journalists should listen to if the otherwise noble profession will be upheld, and its standards improved and sustained. Should Nigerian journalists continue to thrive in the *brown envelope* syndrome, therefore, a time comes when their media of communication will be completely compromised, commercialized and made to become the media for the highest bidders in the society, who may not have anything meaningful to say.

Also, if the current trend continues in Nigeria, one foresees an ugly situation where bribery in journalism will ultimately become the order of the day, a convention and a must-do before journalists will perform their traditional roles.

Finally, accuracy, objectivity, balance and truth are the pillars upon which journalism practice rests. The press must strive to hold these tenets with utmost sacredness. This they can do by eschewing all forms of *brown envelope*. However, failure to stick to the truth at all times will definitely lead the Nigerian press to a total loss of credibility. This means that media users will cease to have trust in media contents, owing to the credibility gap. Thus journalism will lose its relevance! Should the *brown envelope* persist, therefore, the future of journalism in Nigeria will be totally undermined.



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