

Unending Discourse on the Brown Envelope Syndrome in Nigerian Journalism: Another Evaluation of a Deepening Scourge

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1.1: ABSTRACT

The Brown Envelope syndrome, which is a euphemism for bribery and corruption in the Nigerian Journalism practice, is as old as the profession in the country. The scourge has mutated from one level to another, refusing to go away despite campaigns, disciplinary measures and even the various national clamours against corruption. This paper examines the history of the phenomenon, the social, economic and even political reasons that seem to trigger it, the context of the practice itself, and the factors that can be played up to reduce or eliminate it. The paper analyses the variants of the malaise, its facts and fallacies, and its demeaning capabilities, just as it evaluates organisational and professional associations' response to it. It argues that the moral question it raises does a heavy disservice to the journalism profession, which therefore justifies continuous calls for its stoppage. Analysis also focuses on what the malaise takes away from the practitioner, in contrasts with the high prospects, promise, and respectability possessed by the incorruptible practitioner.

1.2: INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's economy is largely adjudged a developing one. All the indices of development including Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, demography, life expectancy, literacy rates and poverty level reflect fact that the country's economy is still developing. Subsequent United Nation (UN) reports have concluded in the affirmative. Indications of this developing state naturally permeate many sectors of the society. The implication of this is that many sectors fall below the ideal level of growth and prosperity. This is especially when compared with the situation in other more civilized societies. The developing state is reflected in inadequate or substandard health facilities; insufficient housing; poor and substandard road networks/transportation system; low standard of education; non-availability of utilities and facilities, like water, regular power supply, etc.; poor security architecture; poor governance ethics; poor standard of living; and a higher level of vices like corruption, nepotism, ethnicism, and tribalism. Because of this situation, citizens are often desperate to survive. Many citizens find ways of cutting corners to make ends' meet.

The foregoing scenario is the first context in which the collection of bribes (brown envelope) is often explained. The reasoning is that the journalist is probably corrupt, just as the police officer demanding bribe to provide a statutory service, or like the immigration officer, who lets off an illegal migrant after being bribed, or the bureaucrat that demands gratification before granting employment, or like the banker that is expecting bribe from his/her customer, or like the medic in a free public health facility, that unilaterally commercialize a service, or like the university lecturer that anticipates some monetary reward from students ahead of good grades, and/or like the engineer failing to repair a public facility until s/he is bribed.

The second context is the poor remuneration of media workers. Media practitioners in Nigeria are some of the lowest paid set of workers in the land. Even with the low salaries, the wages hardly come on time in many organisations. Some hardly even come. The employers cite different reasons for this. Some of these include poor business climate, security challenges, and low staff productivity, amongst others. Private and public media are said to be guilty of this. Some private media that have been cited in the past as failing to pay, or to be regular with salary payment are *Thisday* Newspaper, *African Independent Television* (AIT), and the *Independent* Newspaper.

For these private organisations, their workers are every so often on strike, or threatening to strike. *Thisday* can easily be identified as an example here. The Lagos headquarters of the newspaper has been severally picketed by labour groups. For public media, the state government owned newspapers are particularly noted for failing to live up to the employer/employee work and pay understanding. Added to the difficulty in meeting payment obligations are failure to set up, or meet the expectations of any social security scheme. The average practitioner is therefore in frequent survival difficulty, reflected in an inability to meet personal and family needs, eventually increasing the chances of succumbing to the temptation of bribery.

The third explanations repeatedly canvassed for the malaise is personal discipline, or indiscipline. This is to say that whether or not the above conditions are in evidence, some practitioners are yet going to be corrupted. These set are regarded as the greedy lot, who are acquisitive and who live above their means. They are the proverbial bad apple that wants to live like the business man, the highly paid bank worker, or like the oil executive, forgetting that the media practitioner is a service oriented job, which is not known to be a source of wealth, except for the media mogul, or entrepreneur. The media practitioner is more in the mold of the teacher, or the civil servant, who is ideally expected to live on a regular, predictable income, and hardly likely to rake in

huge sums in profit, as the business person could experience. Some practitioners are in disagreement with this understanding, and are therefore on the prowl, looking for gratifications under different guises, to probably match the big paying jobs.

The fourth reason is the cultural one. This emanates from the culture of giving and receiving present in many African and Nigerian cultures, and which is also justified in the holy books. Many African cultures believe in the virtue of giving. It is seen as a sociological expression of warmth, friendliness and communal spirit. Some therefore extends this practice to the professional stage, where gifts can be exchanged either in kind or in kind. In some cases, it is even forbidden for the younger person to reject a gift from an older person. The giving and receiving practice is therefore validated through this explanation.

I have explained elsewhere the spiritual and philosophical dimensions to giving: “Some holy books priorities giving. Hear them: “Give and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you,” so the Bible says in Luke 6: 38. “Surely the men and women who give in charity and give to Allah a goodly loan, they shall receive double and for them is a noble reward.” The Holy Qur’an also says in 57:18...

“After all, John Holmes once told us that “There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up”. And “when we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed”, so Maya Angelou said in her contributions to the giving debates. Those last two views are not necessarily directly from the scriptures, but the same meanings are shared, eventually expanding understanding on the virtue of giving. Importantly, the rich often times seem wont to giving, instead of leaving or reserving the excesses for their lineages, because of the positive pulls to so do, in the midst of deprivations” (Adeniyi, 2014). Giving and receiving, including contemptuous favours, consequently, thrives under these disparate understandings. I shall now turn to my method.

1.3: METHODOLOGY

This research essentially emanates from participant observation. Before detouring into the academia, I was on the field as a reporter, correspondent for *The Guardian* Newspaper, covering different beats including Judiciary and especially the Political beat, between Lagos and Abuja, for more than a decade. My handling of the court made me to experience some controversial court decisions like those of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections cancellation result, and the complex media and political crisis that followed. On the political beat, where I lasted more, I was severally exposed to the antics of the average politician, through the coverage of the many transition to democracy programmes of military President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, and that of Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar. I also covered the post 1999 National Assembly as a senate correspondent. These experiences gave me different impressions and facts on the subject matter of “*brown envelope*”.

Reflexively as a participant, *The Guardian* newspaper where I worked had a standing rule against it. The paper was one of, and maybe still is, one of the few organisations that paid staff regularly, and therefore had a good ground to criminalize it. Staff in the new Abuja Federal Capital Territory (FCT), (my long term location), were accommodated, with a regular transportation arrangement. The organisation had then lowered staff temptation to it, besides banning staff from being members of beat associations: sub-journalism groups believed to be in the forefront of briberies. We may not have been invulnerable, but we were always grilled, and had consequently enjoyed some admiration from peers, which also lowered our chances of being tempted.

For us, it was a huge risk to be caught in it, and with the benefits from our employers, it was never a risk worth taken. We therefore were certainly not at the forefront of its practice, and never also at the rear, and hardly even in the middle position, even if we could not have been angels, in a dominant climate of reprobates. I am somehow not being judgmental or disrespectful of anyone, organisation, or group of persons in this article. I have only set out to interrogate a malaise from the lenses of a scholar and specifically from my experiences as a practitioner, who sometimes witnessed it, and who was, without being immodest, never caught, or trapped in it. Again at the risk of being immodest, my moral and professional standing plus potentials, proven in tests, eventually earned me the reputable *British Chevening Scholarship*. The scholarship took me to England in the first instance. Reflexivity apart now, I have also mixed interviews with the participant observation method, only to get additional perspective to the positions exposed in this article, and to be as objective as possible. How then do we gauge the contexts of the *Brown Envelope* syndrome in Nigeria? How can it be stopped? I shall turn to this next.

2.1: CONTENTS, DISCONTENTS OF THE BROWN EVELOPE SYNDROME IN NIGERIAN JOURNALISM

The practice of receiving brown envelopes in Nigerian journalism happens in different styles and shapes. The first form of it is from assignments, functions, or events. In this situation, the organizer of an event duly invites media houses to cover their event. The Public Relations or Media manager of the organisation inserts some specific amount into an envelope, which is eventually handed over to the head of the media coverage team, or

individually given to the willing recipients. Some journalists are never offered, if the giver knows you as someone who's likely to reject it, or if you have rejected one before, or if your organisation is noted as being opposed to it.

When the monies are not enveloped, a bulk sum is handed out to a chosen leader or head of a beat association, who eventually distributes to the members. The essence of the gift is supposedly to show appreciation for their coming, and the anticipated coverage, irrespective of their being employed. The monies are sometimes addressed as transportation grant, or as honorarium. Some are meant to tilt report to a particular angle, as might be defined by the manager. The amount given is dependent on the cadre of journalists on the event. It is small if they are "lowly" reporters and more if they are senior writers, or editors. It also depends on the importance the organizers are attaching to the event. This strategy work sometimes, but does not many other times, especially where reputable organisations are involved. The story below as analyzed by a writer, Ihenacho Isaac Asonye is instructive:

"It is in fact with this moral hypocrisy of cover-me-I-cover that one can make some meaning out of the allegation of bribery leveled against Jerry Gana and his staff and the method the administration has chosen to resolve it. The allegation, first broken by Steven Faris in a news story in *Time Magazine* entitled "The Whole Truth", claimed that as a fall-out from the story of the CNN Lagos Bureau Chief Jeff Koinange on Idi Araba, Lagos riot, that many Nigerians had lost interest in democracy and therefore wanted the army back, the minister of information, Jerry Gana invited foreign journalists and representatives of foreign media organizations in Nigeria to a luncheon in Abuja on February 8.

"After upbraiding CNN and pep-talking the foreign journalists to report Nigerian issues more favorably, the minister 'presented them with pack containing government reference books. Nestled in the same bag was a brown envelope stuffed with about \$400' Faris's interpretation of the events of the luncheon was that Jerry Gana not only threatened those journalists but he tried to bribe them with his stuffed brown envelopes. Therefore he concluded, 'Truly free press must be liberated not only from government oppression, but from the temptations of cash-filled envelopes like those issued by Gana's office. According to Faris 'bribery is just one of the challenges Nigeria's press faces as the country makes the difficult transition from dictatorship to democracy...."

"The bribery allegation is untrue since the letter of invitation to the luncheon had carried information that travel and incidental expenses of participants would be reimbursed. - The luncheon was not to influence journalists but to express displeasure over misrepresentation of events in Nigeria by CNN. The harsh tone of the admonition showed that the whole event had not been intended to curry the favor of the twenty foreign journalists. - A sum of fifty-thousand-Naira (not \$400) was provided in an envelope along with informational materials. Participants freely collected them with only two declining after offering genuine reasons. One reporter returned the money later. But the man in the eye of the storm, Jeff Koinange of CNN kept his. - It is usual for most international organizations to provide honorarium for invited journalists to cover expenses. Such is the practice of the United States Information Service, the United Nations agencies and international media organizations" (Ihenacho, 2002). The above incident was a controversial one. Many are not controversial, even as this incident is a reflection of how the practice could go wrong, usually degenerating into embarrassing scandals.

The above case involves gratification while on the beat. In some other cases, the gratifications are taken to them in their offices. Involved in this are different categories of editors, including line editors, sub-editors, amongst others. These ones are relatively innocent-the temptation is directly brought to them. They did not go to meet it, and neither did their schedules expose them to it. The givers here set out to "water the ground", ahead of an anticipated multiple receipts of the givers' stories. With the gratification, the receiver is here supposed to be lavish with the use of the stories.

The third category is those who demand to quash supposedly negative stories. These ones are the blackmailers, the subtle threat giver, who believe the victim will not give if not intimidated or threatened. The style is to work on a negative story around the subject, confront the subject with the story, and then present a prize to kill, or spike the potential report. It could be this direct, or it could take place with a semblance of professionalism, where the subject is asked about his/her side to a story. In offering his side, the subject is courted and told how the damage can be mitigated, if some prize is paid. The second strategy is milder, more humane, than the first that is frontal, harsh and unfriendly. The bottomline is however the same: to extort.

The fourth one is through beat associations. These associations are a dysfunctional offshoot of specialized reporting. Specialized reporting is actually to encourage more informed and knowledgeable writing by a correspondent who has been assigned a beat. But having gotten used to the beat, it soon will degenerate into money making cabals, caucus, or cartels, wholesalers of news, and traders in stories. Stories are "planted" through these groups, while angles are tilted and slanted through them as well. They have been found to exist on beats like finance, politics, ports, aviation, energy, society, education, agriculture, marine, transportation, defence, crime reporting, police affairs, judiciary, diplomatic, states and government houses, city, and arts, across different cities and locations in the country.

Sometimes, the caucuses emerge on the basis of the strength of the media organisation they reporters belong to. Reporters writing for wide circulating and vibrant media are more likely to be favored than those writing for weaker medium. They can also be on the basis of print or electronic media channels: while newspapers and magazines are united in one phase, Television and Radio journalists are united in another, just as online journalists may also be differently identified. It could be on the basis of geographical or regional location of the media organisation. There could be several other yardsticks for the emergence of this cabal.

Fifth are what is now called “Commercial appearance” in the electronic and the print media. News and views dissemination services are supposed to be free. They are a public interest service. They are not supposed to be paid for. News dissemination is the age old calling of the reporter. He is to inform, educate, and entertain, while another arm of the organisation bothers about revenue. It is the professional dissemination of this news that will fetch them credibility and a subsequent advertisers’ fund. Selling the news in the first instance takes a lot away from an organizations’ credibility.

The income generating arm of the media is the advertising section, which charges for advertorials, jingles, public announcements, and such others. The dissemination of news and the expression of views have historically and ethically been free. This is changing though in Nigeria’s media landscape. Personalities are now sometimes charged to appear on programmes, and pages, more especially if it is supply driven, as against been demanded, and irrespective of the personality’s social standing, and the possible high value of his views. The payments in this category may also not be receipted, or may never be recorded as income for the organisation. They are presumably diverted to the pockets of the reporters, and editors, who sourced the personalities. The interview process coming with this arrangement is hardly objective: the questions are patronizing, a hogwash, and falls far below the standard of quality journalism. Money has been paid. The payer would therefore need to get value for his/her money.

The sixth category is those who are treated on one-on-one basis. This class is of the big league. Included here are the columnists, editorial board members or other shades of regular opinion article writers. Envelopes are handed to them most likely in the secured privacy of the giver. The outcome of the gratification is promotional or passing mention in the writer’s column. The mentions always give the writer’s patronizing, or promotional motives away. More often than not, there hardly can be a witness to this, but the uncritical disposition of the writer at the possible mention of the name to issues gives room for high level suspicion.

The seventh category in this loose classification of brown envelope journalism in Nigeria is that perpetrated by media owners. A Media owner here implies publisher, editors-in-chief, media entrepreneur, and the other sets of media moguls. This group is a big league. They negotiate big, in multi-millions, and billions, and have the influence and/or power to galvanize their workers to do whatever they want. They are often tools of big businessmen, and government agencies, and departments, needing to set some noble or ignoble agenda and ready to pay the usually huge bill of the media owner. A few have run into trouble in the past, having been exposed for receiving illegal monies, or for collecting government money that were meant for other purposes.

Many of these set are easily seen as controversial, and bereft of credibility. But they thrive all the same, and have consistently emerged as notable employers of brilliant sets of journalists over the years. Of course, a contrast in expectation and perception though. From the above therefore, the categories can be easily illustrated as follows:

| S/N | CATEGORY | DEFINITION |
|-----|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. | From Regular Events/Functions | Envelopes collected after events |
| 2. | Office Collections | Envelopes taken to the newsrooms |
| 3. | Blackmailing | Victims threatened with negative stories, while payments are demanded to kill them. |
| 4. | Through Beat Associations | Formation of money making cabals |
| 5. | Commercialization of News | Payment for news and views |
| 6. | One-On-One Engagement | Borne out of Personal recognition |
| 7. | Practice of Media Owners | Big league racketing/Wheeling and dealing |

3.1: CONCLUSIONS:

DISCUSSING THE FUTURE OF THE BROWN ENVELOPE PRACTICE

The notoriety of this practice has grown to levels where its identification is even differently coded. It is called *Kwa, Keske, Kommunikwa, Ihon, Gbalamu*, and *last paragraph* depending on the preference of those involved, and their location. The coding of the practice is unique to the code users and evokes a sense of accomplices amongst them. It is delightful to their hearing, makes them happy, and lets them feel fulfilled, even ironically. When it is not forthcoming, many could feel bad, and might try sourcing for it. It sometimes becomes habitual, that an initiated can hardly imagine a life without it.

And concerned about this malaise, some organisations have begun issuing warnings to members of the public not to give such gratifications. Members of the public are encouraged to report journalists who seek it

before doing their stories. *The Punch* Newspaper and the *Daily Trust* are particularly noted for this warning, which appears at the back pages of the newspapers. This recent development is an indication of growing concern from some media outfits, and the need to take some measures against it. The expectations, coupled with the earlier mentioned stand of *The Guardian* against such practices, are likely to increase in the future, which might ultimately prevent, or reduce the perpetuation of the act.

Other than this are the concerns of public and private media bodies, like the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), The Guild of Editors, The Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), The Nigerian Press Council (NPC), the Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria (BON), and the National Broadcasting Organisation (NBO). These organisations have one rule or the other discouraging the *brown envelope* syndrome. Many of them have organized seminars, workshops, retreats, and talk shops, to highlight the dangers of this act. The leaders have also talked against it. The tragedy sometimes is that the campaigners often do not show good examples, which is naturally fatal for the messages they try to pass across.

Opinions are also strong that with an improved economy, a better working condition of journalists, and an efficient social security system, the temptation to receive bribe might be eliminated. Because of the failure of leadership over years, leading to poor facilities, infrastructures and utilities, the citizen is forced to resort to self-help. The help, like the *brown envelope* syndrome, eventually debases, demeans and clatters the self-esteem of the receiver. His reputation is lowered in the estimation of the giver, whether consciously or unconsciously, because s/he is seen as worth a prize-most times a meager one. The giver is not also exonerated. Being an accomplice, s/he encourages the furtherance of a vice, as against helping its elimination in the mold of a responsible citizen. What comes up in the matrix is the need for a rather holistic solution like a campaign for general social reorientation, ethical renewal and moral regeneration.

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Dr. Abiodun Adeniyi graduated with a Second Class Upper Honours in Sociology from the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, after which he worked as a reporter and writer for The Guardian Newspapers, Nigeria, covering various beats in Lagos and Abuja, for more than a decade. He won the British Chevening Scholarship in 2003 to study International Communications at the University of Leeds, England and began his Ph.D. research immediately after his Master’s Degree programme at the same University. He was awarded his doctorate degree in Communication Studies in 2008, for his research on Migrant Nigerians and the Online Mediation of Distance, Longing and Belonging.

Adeniyi returned to his native Nigeria in 2009, working as a Communications Consultant on the platform of the World Bank Economic Reform and Governance Project (ERGP) at the Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP), Presidency, Abuja. On expiration of the project, he became Lead Consultant at Witswords Consults Limited (WCL), Abuja, before joining Baze University as a senior lecturer in Mass Communication. He has been visiting professor of Communications and Multi-Media Design at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), Yola, and an external examiner at the National Open University, Lagos. Widely published, online and offline, in local and foreign journals, his present research interests are in the fields of public relations and advertising, strategic communications, media and governance, and media of diasporas.