

3.Sam Botteril

“The Integrity of Journalism in West Africa”

My name is Sam Botterill and I am currently studying politics in the second year at Durham University. It was suggested that I write this paper as a result of the experiences I had in the Republic of Ghana on the West African coastline. I spent two months on a placement with a major national newspaper, shadowing reporters and trainee reporters and I was able to experience at first hand the way in which Ghanaian news is delivered.

The nature of journalism is based on its ability to change the way people think about an issue; there is therefore a need to protect journalism in order to safeguard a country from corruption. Political commentators have now begun to define the power of media, Ron Arnold in the *New Internationalist* states that facts no longer are important in politics suggesting that ‘perception is reality’¹. Joel Bleifuss, also in the *New Internationalist*, states that for politicians the secret to their prosperity is not to change and solve a problem in society but actually only to change the way in which people think about the problem. To prevent governments abusing this power and being corrupt the media must be able to act independently of the story in every respect. Anything other than this would constitute some level of corruption, furthermore the nature of corruption is that it may grow from an apparently small and isolated case into something much more significant.

In Ghana the way in which journalism is carried out seems to be open to abuse, one area of concern is the way in which payments are made which is by envelope and usually from the person who is seeking press coverage. These are structural problems that need to be addressed in order for the pressmen to be seen to be in a position to maintain their integrity.

This style of remuneration calls into question what we mean by a ‘free media’. Freedom House, a nongovernmental organisation that produces a regular survey of the levels of freedom of the press across the world, suggests that Ghana does not have a totally free Press. However what is more important is that the criteria for deciding how free the press are in a country, used by Freedom House, does not take into full account how the payment of the press take place.

It is important to note that there are similar causes for concern in journalism within developed countries. In the United Kingdom the process for paying journalists is regulated and prevents any direct cash payments to journalists. However there clearly seems to be an accepted convention where gifts are sent to members of the print media, especially by major Fashion Houses. Kate Lowe, Associate Publisher at Vogue magazine stated in a telephone interview that gifts from major fashion houses are received and depending on the size and scale of the magazine these have different levels of leverage. A major league magazine can afford to be more objective, but more junior magazines may find it more difficult to show the same level of impartiality on receiving gifts.

There has also been considerable concern expressed recently about the Daily Express and the nature of the management there. The Observer newspaper, in the United Kingdom, recently ran a story in which the editor of the Sunday Express newspaper, Michael Pilgrim, revealed in a leaked memo that he was under immense pressure to do things “outside the legitimate and ethical remit of a newspaper”¹. Pilgrim's memo also details that he was asked on several occasions to suppress evidence of wrongdoing.

These examples are intended to highlight that there may also be problems within journalism in the U.K. Furthermore that even where the press is independent of the state, it can still be open to some form of abuse.

The international federation of journalists states clearly that a journalist should regard the acceptance of a bribe in any form as a “grave professional offence”. If this is applied literally to the payments made to journalists in Ghana it would suggest that they were being bribed. What should be made clear is that the money being offered was not considered by the journalists to be a bribe? However it could easily have looked like one to an observer. The money characteristically arrived in an unmarked paper envelope containing between ten and twenty thousand Cedi. However on one particular occasion a water supply agency invited a number of journalists on a day trip round various selected sites with the intention of showing them what good job the agency were doing. On this occasion the envelope contained forty thousand Cedi. It is difficult to know whether this treatment was a bribe or a convention. Is it possible for journalists to accept this without appearing to compromise their position?

In the Czech Republic code of Ethics the explanation of what the journalist can and cannot do is much clearer, stating that such practices as gaining money from the source of a story is unethical. In section two of the code, part b, makes the point that the journalist should avoid doing anything that could undermine their integrity.

“In that sense journalists are duty bound to:

b) refrain from any activities that could compromise them or lead to a conflict of interest,
f) not to accept money in the public service or from a private company if, by doing so, their position as journalists or their influence as such could be abused.”¹

The code then goes on to make the point that because the journalist is in the public service he or she can not accept any money directly from a private source in relation to work done or carried out. It appears that the Ghanaian system breaches this code in both section F and B.

However the code also stresses that all journalists have the right to attach themselves to their own code of ethics. Thus if Ghana as a sovereign country employs its own codes of conduct, that take into account payment to journalists from the source of the story, they cannot be argued with. Perhaps then there is no case for suggesting that the practice of giving journalists money from the source of the story in Ghana is unethical. It is important to consider that journalistic ethics, as described above, should in effect be similar the world over and it is axiomatic that journalists must be independent from the story they are writing.

The Constitution of Ghana, 1992, however does make a special effort to protect its media’s freedom with the institution of Article 21 (1)(A) which deals with the freedom of expression in Ghana. “All persons shall have the right to – freedom of speech and expression, which shall include the freedom of the press and other media.”¹

This is a broad statement but it does maintain the right to an unhindered media. However a media system that is in anyway funded by its news sources cannot by definition be described as free in the strictest sense of the word.

Furthermore the Ghanaian journalists code of ethics also points out that the journalist should not accept a bribe in line with professional duties. It also states journalists should not be allowed to accept what it describes as “...any form of inducement...”¹. Surely this clause

should outlaw exactly the practices that take place regularly throughout Accra and money paid by press conference organisers to journalists must be a type of inducement.

The need for the Ghanaian journalist to be independent of the source of the story was also echoed by Kobby Acheampong in an article written on the Ghana Home Page website. The article contains a code of conduct for journalists. He states the need for impartiality at all costs.

“ With regard to serving the public interest our writing should ...maintain an impartial, arm’ length (sic) relationship with anyone seeking to influence what we have to write.”¹

In conclusion it seems that the payment system described, is not in line with the Ghanaian Ethical code.

One of the major concerns of a country trying to develop its media is to provide a system that the people can trust have a media that it can trust. This is echoed by the Department for International Development who highlight the necessity to keep the domestic media in the public faith.

“If domestic media lack credibility people will turn increasingly to outside sources; and the more conflicts they see between domestic and external reports, the more sceptical they will become about what their local media are serving up.”¹

If the media are not to be believed, when a piece of investigative journalism is published it may be ignored. Corruption will then go unchecked through the system, despite being publicly deplored.

The problems associated with the Ghanaian payment structure was demonstrated exactly when the paper reported on the preliminary hearing of a murder trial. The reporters were invited by the bereaved family to the preliminary hearing of a trial at a small tribunal in the suburbs of Accra. At first the situation was calm and the supporters of the accused and the bereaved waited patiently for the proceedings to start. There was at first a delay and then the proceedings were abandoned altogether. As a result there was no story, so the bereaved supporters asked the pressmen to take a photograph of them outside the tribunal room.

The situation then escalated as the supporters of the accused tried to stop the picture being taken. It appeared that they were worried that it would in some way effect the outcome of the trial, which was to take place in central Accra. What made matters more interesting was that the pressmen were then invited back to the house of the bereaved where they were entertained and then driven back to their offices and paid by envelope. The most important point here is that the supporters of the accused were reacting to the fact that in some way they would lose out by the story being reported in the paper. This demonstrates a lack of confidence by the public in the media.

Ironically they would have had nothing to worry about as the matter was, to use the legal term, 'Sub Judicae', and would there for have not gone to press. The problem for the journalists is that they managed to compromise themselves as far as the supporters of the accused were concerned, by being invited by the bereaved party and accepting their hospitality afterwards and also receiving a small payment. It does not seem difficult to understand why there was a fight.

It must be remembered that these journalists are not making huge sums of money from these current practices. Some who are on probation with the paper rely heavily on the money gained for their livelihoods. The problem for journalism in Ghana is the way the way in which payments are being made as they not regulated and ethically contravene the impartiality of the journalists. This then perpetuates any loss of public perception of media impartiality. This is especially important in a country like Ghana where the large outlets of news such as the GTC, the Ghanaian Times and the Daily Graphic are still State owned.