

THE MEDIA IN SIERRA LEONE

Introduction

The importance of the media (newspapers, television, radio, the internet etc) before, during and after the August 11, 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections in our country cannot be overemphasized, because everywhere in the world, elections are won or lost largely through the help of the media. Indeed I cannot imagine any election, big or small, rural or urban, in which the media do not play a prominent role. The town crier in the tiniest village or hamlet is playing the role of the media when he transmits messages to the village folks. And he definitely can influence how those messages are received or consumed through the tone or inflection of his voice or by injecting his opinion or adding spice to the message.

So the media are as old as time, as universal as the cosmos and as powerful as hurricanes. No wonder people say the pen is mightier than the sword when comparing writers to rulers.

Having said that, I would like to discuss the role and responsibilities of the media in the forthcoming elections in Sierra Leone under four headings, namely, the independence of the media, objectivity and fairness, accuracy and balance and equal treatment.

Independence of the media

In order to do its job well, the media need to have an appreciable level of independence. By independence I mean the ability to say or write what they think or what their readers think. It's false for any media organ that depends on advertisements or donations to claim total independence. As long as you depend on somebody (advertiser, business person, donor etc) for your sustenance or livelihood or survival, your independence is at stake. Despite this problem, however, some media organizations, especially those in the West, manage to maintain and uphold a significant level of independence. In Sierra Leone, government agencies are some of the biggest advertisers. This explains why you don't see a lot of investigative journalism in the country. Newspapers that tend to be very critical or do some investigative journalism tend to get very little or no adverts from government agencies.

Even private companies tend to shy away from such newspapers or radio stations because businesses in the country, especially the foreign ones tend to depend on the goodwill of the government in power and would not like to be in their bad books. The enemy of my friend is my enemy, seems to be the watchword for many of them. In such an environment, it's extremely difficult to have free, independent and unfettered media.

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But a media organization has to be highly independent or else it would only represent what I may call the master's voice, that is the voice of the guy that pays the bills. Remember, he who pays the piper calls the tune. So if the master were a corrupt politician or nasty businessperson, the media organization would have no alternative but to sing their praises and present them as angels to the reading or listening public. The danger here is that such people would become more and more powerful and more and more destructive because most people tend to believe what they read in the newspaper, hear on the radio and watch on TV.

Most media organizations in Sierra Leone are funded or sponsored by politicians and businesspersons. They also depend to a large extent on advertising income from government agencies. This dependence affects the way news and analyses are presented in the country. The Sierra Leone media have to be independent, have to be run as commercial enterprises with business plans and credit from banking institutions. It's highly unlikely that the media in Sierra Leone would change its habits as long as the current absolute dependence continues. There is a need for the banks and other financial institutions to come to the rescue of professional and serious journalists in the country by making loans accessible to them with the necessary guarantees, which many of them can provide if we are to get truly independent media in the country.

Objectivity and Fairness

In journalism schools, journalists are always told to be objective and fair in their reportage and news analysis. This is because the reader has full confidence and trust in them. The reader is like the student who has absolute confidence in the teacher, who believes whatever the teacher tells him. In a country like Sierra Leone where most people are illiterate, the trust and confidence in the journalist is in many cases, absolute. But are Sierra Leonean journalists objective and fair in their reportage?

I would say very few are. This is a country where most journalists are badly paid, have little education and are always hungry. Most of them would therefore distort the truth or massacre somebody's reputation for a small fee to buy something to eat or clothes to wear. The politicians and crooks know this and they capitalize on it. We are unlikely to see fairness and objectivity in the Sierra Leone media in the coming months as long as journalists remain badly paid and lack education in the tenets and ethics of the profession. Indeed many newspapers and radio stations in the country face enormous financial problems and can barely stay in business not to talk of paying their reporters.

Of course, journalists, like other Sierra Leoneans, support political parties, but a well trained and well paid journalist knows he or she has no right to throw personal opinions or perceptions into the news stories they write or send through the airwaves. Nobody can claim total objectivity but the conscientious and professional journalist knows it's a good habit to cultivate. And there are a few conscientious and professional journalists in the country, normally found among stringers of foreign media who are normally better paid or among the so-called "radical" journalists.

Accuracy and Balance

Somebody once said journalism is history in a hurry. If that were true, then journalists always need to be accurate in whatever they write or say because scholars will consult their reports, students and others many, many years after the journalist would have gone to heaven or hell.

Journalists also need to balance their stories, that is, to let all sides speak or defend themselves like in a court of law. One-sided stories are not only in bad taste, they also distort the truth. They distort history too. Just look at the way Bai Bureh was presented by some 19th century British journalists and historians. For most of them, he is nothing but a terrorist and criminal! But is this the truth? You and I know it's not. Do Sierra Leonean journalists present the news accurately and do they give all sides the opportunity to defend themselves? Will they do that before, during and after the elections? I leave that to your judgment and imagination.

Equal Treatment

Closely linked to fairness and objectivity is the need for the journalist to open the gate to everybody to express themselves (within limits). Newspaper editors, radio and television producers need to publish or air views even from people they don't like because their readers and listeners come from different backgrounds. A more important reason is that THE PUBLIC NEEDS TO KNOW. Journalists must serve the public interest, not their own personal interests. Perhaps some journalists would understand this concept better when they visualize their newspapers or radio stations as public property, not personal property.



Most journalists find it hard to accept this, hence the biased and skewed reportage and analyses. However, you cannot force journalists to accept views and opinions from everywhere. The decision has to come from the journalist; it's a question of ethics or morality. Rich people combat this problem by paying for newspaper space or airtime. But we cannot encourage this in a country like Sierra Leone where most of the inhabitants are poor, destitute and ignorant. There is too much at stake.

In conclusion, I would like to say the Sierra Leone media still have a long way to go when it comes to independence, objectivity, fairness, equal treatment and accuracy. Journalists in the country need more training, not just the academic type available at the University of Sierra Leone but also constant workshops and seminars on the craft and the ethics of the profession at home and abroad. They also need access to loans and advertisement (and training in self-employment) to enter the business arena and stay in business, which in turn will allow them to get down to the business of producing good journalism.

It is naive for the United Nations, politicians and other stakeholders to ask the media in Sierra Leone to be fair, objective and accurate at all times when very little or nothing is being done to assist them as business entities. For most of them, he who pays the piper (or journalist) will always call the tune.



Cotton Tree, Freetown The famous landmark in the centre of Freetown used to be a slave market and is a national symbol of Sierra Leone and a landmark in the capital. It was here in 1792 that a group of former American slaves joined the settlement and gave it the name Freetown.