

# State of the Media Report 2014



## A Message from MRCG



The Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), established in May 2014, comprises of key stakeholders from the media industry and academic institutions in the country including the Department of Mass Communication at Fourah Bay College (FBC, Mass Comm), The Independent Media Commission (IMC), Guild of Editors (GoE), Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), Sierra Leone Association of Journalist (SLAJ), Independent Radio Network (IRN), Sierra Leone Reporters Union (SLRU), Cotton Tree News(CTN) and the Ministry of Information and Communication. MRCG was established as an independent corporate entity funded by the UNDP to act as the key driver of the media reform agenda in Sierra Leone.

The MRCG was established as part of the media development strategy which is the outcome of a study that was conducted in 2013 to map the capacity needs of the media in Sierra Leone. After several consultations and stakeholders workshops, four priorities were obtained which formed the basis of this strategy. These priorities are as follows:

1. Improved ethics of the media through regulatory or self-regulatory mechanisms.
2. Promoting transparent and independent allocation of licenses, handling of complaints and stimulating an enabling regulatory and political environment for professional and pluralistic media.
3. Sustainable and independent public service broadcasting serving all the people of the country.
4. Strengthened professionalism and sustainability of organizations and improved people's participation in media development and content.

The objectives of the Sierra Leone Media development strategy are the derivatives of these four priorities.

The publication of this first edition of the State of the Media Report is a move to take stock of the operations of various sectors of the media in Sierra Leone during 2014. No doubt 2014 was overshadowed by the Ebola virus disease outbreak in the country and it influenced the reportage greatly. Nevertheless, some of the findings of the writers and researchers reflect the state of the media even before the Ebola outbreak.

This report will enable us to clearly see the gaps, challenges and strengths within the media in Sierra Leone. Thus it will adequately inform strategic interventions for reform.

I hope it will serve as a very useful resource to you.

*Ransford S. C. Wright*

**Chairman-MRCG**

## Acknowledgment

This maiden edition of the State of the Media Report produced by media practitioners has been on the work schedule of the Media Reform Coordinating Group since last year. As with all matters of this nature and particularly because there was no example of such a report ever being produced in SLAJ to fall back on, the editorial board spent a lot of hours carefully planning what you are now reading.

The board decided to adopt this unique approach of attacking the main questions in today's media landscape in Sierra Leone by a series of articles covering those key sectors. It is likely that we haven't met everybody's expectation in terms of the range of issues covered or some of the perspectives from which our contributors have approached their tasks. Please free to contact the MRCG secretariat with those concerns. We value them.

I feel extremely proud to have been asked by my colleagues to chair this first Editorial Board of the State of the Media Report and I can say without any reservation that I enjoyed working with a very professional team of journalists and people who believe in the mission of journalism.

Our editor who read through the final copy also did a fantastic job for which all Sierra Leonean journalists are grateful.

We also profoundly thank the UNDP for funding the production of this magazine.

Hope you find this work useful.

*Isaac Massaquoi*

*Chairman, Editorial Board  
State of the Media Report 2014*



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## Foreword

This publication heralds a new phase in the media world in Sierra Leone as it begins to present a yearly audit of the gains and challenges facing media practice and practitioners in the country.

The 2014 State of The Media Report is a brave attempt to provide both an introspective and an outsider's view of the media landscape. It is a unique attempt, because it was done under the direction of the media practitioners themselves.

As we look back, it is clear that the most dominant feature has been the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). This came with a whole new set of challenges for the media.

The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), being the umbrella body for media practitioners in the country, rose to the challenge and contributed in a unique way far beyond even our own expectations. Journalists left their comfort zones and ventured into the worst hit areas, risking their own lives to tell the story.

Newspapers and radio stations volunteered free advert space and airtime, and SLAJ mobilised over 40 radio stations in the country under the structure of the Independent Radio Network (IRN) to simulcast the biggest sensitization drive ever launched and sustained against the spread of the EVD.

The media landscape became unified and spoke with one voice delivering Ebola messages and changing the narrative from disbelief about the existence of Ebola to methods of dealing safely with the virus and helping to curb its spread.

When the nation became tired with the spread of the infection, SLAJ introduced the "Yellow Ribbon campaign" which has come to be one of, if not the most successful sensitization drives to get to zero.

This year also saw a massive expansion of the use of new media and the increasing threats it poses to the protection of the work of journalists. This was prominently noted in this year's World Press Freedom Day theme - "Let Journalism Thrive Towards Better Reporting, Gender Equality and Safety in the Digital Age."

This publication is however a first step in what would hopefully be a sustained effort to present a yearly audit of the media landscape in Sierra Leone.

May journalism continue to thrive in Sierra Leone.

*Kelvin Lewis*

*SLAJ President*

# Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ)

56 Campbell St. Freetown, Sierra Leone



## SLAJ - Yellow Ribbon campaign to End Ebola

- The Yellow Ribbon symbolizes the commitment of individuals, groups and institutions taking action to end Ebola in Sierra Leone and across the region.
- The Yellow Ribbon represents a commitment to protect yourself, your family and your country by changing dangerous behaviours and adopting key activities.

### Bury all dead bodies safely

- Call 117 and tell your community leader if you know someone has died
- Do not touch, bathe or bury a dead person. Do not hide dead people
- Allow only trained people to handle a dead body

### Keep sick people away from others

- Do not touch sick people or things they have used
- Keep them in their own area and stay 4 steps away
- Get the person into treatment quickly by calling 117

### Speak out if you know of a sick person

- Help find everyone who touched or interacted with a sick person. If you did, stay home and tell your community leader and call 117
- Do not hide sick people - Do not let others hide sick people
- Anyone who touched or interacted closely with a sick person is a “Contact” who could have Ebola

### “Contacts” must stay in one area with food and water

- Anyone who touches or interacts with a person who has Ebola must stay in their area for 21 days - Make sure “Contacts” do not run away
- Help health workers find these “Contacts”
- them food and water and encourage them



#SLAJ\_YellowRibbon

# The Media's Response to Ebola in Sierra Leone

By *Dr. Julius Spencer*

## Introduction

The first confirmed case of Ebola in Sierra Leone was officially recorded on 25th May, 2014. Prior to that, there had been a number of reports about suspected cases as well as the lack of preparedness of government to meet the challenges of an Ebola outbreak in the country in the media. This led to certain government officials accusing the media of scaremongering. However, what happened after May 25 did prove that the government was indeed ill-prepared for the devastating impact of Ebola on the population and on the health care system of the country.

One of the major causes of the spread of the disease from a small village on the border with Guinea to virtually engulfing the whole country and resulting in the deaths of more than 3,000 people, was a lack of understanding of the characteristics of the disease and an unwillingness by people to change their behavior. A Knowledge Attitude and Practice (KAP) survey done in September 2014 after the disease had been in the country for about 4 months stated as follows:

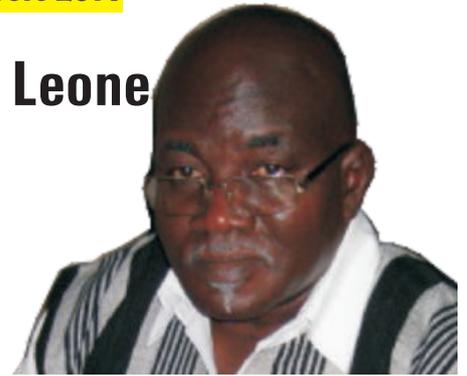
The Government of Sierra Leone, development partners, and civil

society continue to place a major focus on educating the public on how to prevent the transmission of EVD as well as encouraging people to promptly seek medical care in the event that they experience signs and symptoms associated with the disease. Despite these efforts, public education and social mobilization campaigns were met with varied resistance from communities. Myths, misconceptions, and misinformation about the disease continue to put a strain on the fight against it.

In the early stages of the fight against the disease, there was no attempt by government to engage the media as a partner in the fight. Individual media institutions were simply being contracted to disseminate messages prepared by the Ministry of Health and its partners. The communication response to the disease was therefore rather disjointed and lacked focus. This was due partly to the fact that there was no coherent strategy in place to engage the media, and, in fact, there was no communication strategy for the National Ebola response.

## The SLAJ Intervention

The situation with respect to the media changed in July 2014 when, concerned about the rapid spread of



Ebola in the country, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) convened a meeting of its members to discuss what the association could do to help bring the Ebola outbreak in the country to an end. During this meeting, it was decided that since neither as an association, nor as individual media practitioners, journalists could not contribute money to the fight as many other institutions were doing at the time, all radio stations should donate 30 minutes of airtime and newspapers a quarter page space on a daily basis for Ebola messages. A committee was then set up to coordinate this and any other activities it thought fit.

## Radio

The committee, which was named the SLAJ Ebola Response Committee, decided that for the 30 minutes of airtime donated by radio stations to have maximum impact, it should be used to broadcast a special programme on the Ebola Viral Disease (EVD) that will be produced on a daily basis by a production team made up of SLAJ members. It was also decided that the programme will be simulcast on all the radio stations in the country. Following consultations with station managers, it was decided that the programme should be broadcast during prime time in the evening.

The programme was titled “Dreb Ibolah” [Drive Ebola Away] and was done in the magazine format. Its stated objectives were to:

- Provide an early response outlet for the Ministry of Health and the Social Mobilisation pillar of the national Ebola response for EVD issues on an on-going basis.

**Contd. P 8**



*Journalists interviewing NERC CEO Rtd. Maj. Palo Conteh*

# The Media's Response to Ebola in Sierra Leone

From P 7

- Increase the level of awareness and understanding of EVD by members of the public.

- Educate the public on action to be taken to reduce and eventually bring a halt to the spread of EVD in the country.

## Programme Content

In terms of content and approach, the programme contained voice reports and various segments which utilised other programme formats like interview, discussion, drama and features.

The programme mainly comprised verified and credible information on EVD from experts through interviews with medical doctors and other health experts. Periodically, there was a segment on the socio-political and economic impacts of the EVD on the country. This information came from designated government ministries and official spokespersons, academics and civil society activists.

Other segments included highlights from press briefings on EVD, jingles and spot messages on EVD, audience interaction/participation/feedback in the form of text messages, regional reports on EVD and a skit on EVD.

After about the first month of broadcasts, it was decided to expand the programme to one hour. This decision was taken primarily because it was realized that a 30-minutes programme did not provide enough time to deal with the issues related to the EVD in a comprehensive manner. The one-hour programme maintained the magazine format and the information content established by the 30-minutes programme.

In order to provide some support to radio stations broadcasting the programme, many of which are in a constant struggle to stay on air as a result of lack of resources, funding was sought by SLAJ to pay for the additional thirty-minutes of airtime at a reduced rate on 48 radio stations

spread around the country. The one-hour programme commenced broadcast at the beginning of September 2014 and was on air every day till the end of May 2015.

## Training of Broadcasters on EVD

According to a Foundation Hirondelle Study in 2010, the most important, most reliable and most used source of information for Sierra Leoneans is the radio. This was confirmed by the EVD KAP study conducted in September 2014 which reported as follows:

“Not only does radio have the widest reach, it is also the most preferred channel with 85% of respondents preferring to get Ebola related information through the radio.”

Due to its awareness of the dependence of the Sierra Leone population on radio for information, SLAJ decided in October 2014 that there needed to be a deeper engagement of radio in the fight against the EVD than existed at the time. It decided that there needed to be more than just the daily one-hour simulcast radio programme and radio DJs, programme presenters and continuity announcers needed to be empowered to get involved directly in the fight. The strategy adopted to achieve this was based on ensuring that a broad spectrum of broadcasters were well informed about the EVD so they could independently engage the public on the issues.

In order to achieve this, SLAJ sought funding from the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to carry out training workshops for broadcasters on EVD across the country. Workshops were held in the four regions with 5 participants from each radio station being trained on EVD and programme production for EVD. The participants were encouraged to ensure that they engaged the public on EVD issues

through the various programmes they were involved in on their radio stations. This training programme had the desired effect and resulted in EVD issues being addressed on programmes which normally would not deal with such issues. Music DJs, presenters and continuity announcers across the country added their voices to the campaign to change behaviours that were making it difficult to bring Ebola to an end in the country.

## Newspapers

Even though the focus of the SLAJ intervention was radio, the print media, specifically newspapers, was used to provide education for the public on EVD. As pointed out earlier, the SLAJ meeting held in July 2014 to decide on the association's response to the EVD outbreak in the country agreed that all newspapers should provide a quarter page on a daily basis free of charge for disseminating information about the disease. The SLAJ Ebola Response Committee provided some information for publication on this space, but to a large extent, newspapers generally sourced their own information, primarily from the Internet and in most cases used up a lot more than a quarter page on a daily basis for this. In fact, for most newspapers, at least one page daily was dedicated to information about Ebola

In addition to this, SLAJ sourced funds from the US CDC to pay for an additional quarter page space in 10 newspapers. This was added to the quarter page donated by the newspapers and was used for a half page advert on EVD on a daily basis for three months.

## Television

While television did not feature in the SLAJ response to EVD, there was indeed a major response by television to the outbreak. At the time of the outbreak, there was only one television station on the air that was doing general programming, and this was the national

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By **Tonya Musa**

*This article investigates the influence and impact of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), on the output of the media in Sierra Leone. The issues dealt with are the trends observed as a result of focusing on the proliferation of modern communication technology in mass communication today. These include computers, camcorders, iPad, scanners, cell phones, multimedia hardware systems, and digitalization of media content and networking of data through Internet or via satellite.*

Today's world has been aptly described as the “wired city” or “global village” because of the spontaneity with which information is disseminated and received. This article aims to shed light on the relationship between robust public spheres and emerging information and communication technology experienced in the broadcast and the print media landscape in Sierra Leone in 2014.

This discourse also aims to stimulate discussions on:

- i. Public space to deliberate political and socio-economic issues in development
- ii. Media literacy
- iii. Ethical issues confronting the use of ICTs in media communication.

Going along the streets of Freetown, it is not uncommon to see people busy with their mobile phones, iPods, iPhones and other hardware. Depending on their inclination, they are either making calls, browsing the internet or checking on social networks, while others might be listening to radio programmes or reading online news or updates of global sports.

This phenomenon is not limited to the outdoors. It is also visible in the computerization of the newsroom and digital journalistic practice (broadcasting and printing, using a single network in the form of the Internet). Today, most newsrooms in the capital, Freetown and in some major towns around the country are

computerized and have network facilities. This convergence of human communication technology – printing, broadcasting and networking – with the mass media, has had immense effect on the output of the media in Sierra Leone. As a result of computerization and digitalization, that is, the use of digital technology to capture, process, store and retrieve media content and the global opportunity to network information or data through phones, and computers, Sierra Leone is fast transforming into an “information society”. It is now a knowledge-based society producing and transacting in software, hardware, NetWare, cloud ware etc., as leading components of its economic systems. This technological advancement has created a space for new culture and traditions using the changing paradigms.

The cyberspace (or cybernetics) is a creature of the ICTs revolution of the 21st century. The practice of virtual conferences, that is, through video and telephone for news-gathering and processing, is changing. The need for cyber presence, recognition and participation should be given serious consideration by every business and professional practice aiming for success in contemporary Sierra Leone.

The media landscape is changing rapidly as a result of the digital connectivity in public and private communication using satellite and the Internet – what Manuel Castells (1996), refers to as “the rise of the network society.” The “network society” exists with interconnected computerization of information services involving digitalization of public and personal information with a robust exchange of data services online. In such a society, people are connected by communication technologies which are used for socio-political and economic discourses by state and non-state actors through the media. Media output therefore, in this context, includes the clear understanding of news values by journalists and society using these technologies or their facilities.

Another indicator of media output is active media usage by the audience in

terms of the opportunity to compose messages for the media and the opportunity for most media consumers to respond to information from the media using emerging communication platforms, such as phones, computers, laptops, iPad, websites and emails or social networks.

Media output is also related to the level of media literacy. In Sierra Leone, for example, knowledge about ICTs and their social issues should be made available to every Sierra Leonean in order to have a sustainable discourse on the impact of ICTs on media output, access and effect in the country.

It is very important to understand that a huge disparity exists between urban and rural communities in Sierra Leone in terms of the access to ICTs for public debates and communication. Most of those participating through phone-ins, SMS, and by Facebook comments in media reporting or programming are mainly urban residents who have access to digital technology and can afford to pay to remain connected to the Internet. Such people are more informed and active in appreciating this impact.

Most hardware and software are sold in urban centres because of the limited computer literacy and the affordability of network services. However, cell phones and iPads are increasing in some peripheral areas because of growing interest in social media mainly in the form of WhatsApp and Facebook. Some community radio stations have just one desk-top computer for their staff and Admin and a lap-top exclusively for the manager.

Some of the radio stations have printers, scanners and network facilities in addition to the ones mentioned. The digital migration now requires cyber representation of media organizations by way of designing and using websites for most of the radio and television stations in order to provide real time reports.

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# The Impact of Technology on Media Output

## From P 9

Newspaper production is done mainly in Freetown. One reason for this is the availability of access to technological facilities for digital production and printing. Most records are now scanned and sent on social media, thus increasing the need for newspapers to give factual stories. This also goes for television broadcasting. Some newspapers are now printed in colour with digital photographs. Some people are even able to access newspapers through cellphones, laptops and iPads.

The crucial issue here is, because it is easy to copy and paste from the WhatsApp to Facebook or even download images which create the possibility for intrusion on people's privacy, exposing journalists to the online newspaper practice requires much orientation on ethical issues like avoiding plagiarism, hate speech, and obscenity.

Broadcasting is also going digital in Africa, especially as seen in television and radio. The innovation is on much interactivity with viewers through Skype, SMS, Facebook, twitter, etc. Much is required for the development of interactive high definition television broadcasting in Sierra Leone because of the absence of the required ICTs infrastructure and expertise even where the policy exists. One such policy is to make the national broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), digital by 2016.

The second issue is on the effective usage of ICTs for media communication. Today young people are highly motivated in public communication as a result of the development of social media. This has increased public space for critical debates on national issues. For instance, Facebook and WhatsApp networks impacted very effectively on the sensitization of the public about the outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease. Figures and locations were made available on these networks for users before they

were reported by the mass media. At the time of writing this piece, however, a huge gap still exists in terms of those who are knowledgeable about the correct usage of these technologies and can express themselves and present their point of view in a national discourse, and those who are not.

Another aspect of social representation is based on gender analysis wherein both men and women are using ICTs in order to be part of public debates concerning community and national issues that are reported by the media.

Recognizing the impact of ICTs in media discourse on the need for regulations, arguing on representation and participation of the public in this new space, Memunatu Pratt stated at a seminar on the Constitutional Review process: "The public sphere functions as the space in which the residents of polity come together to articulate and formulate their unmet political needs...the political public sphere represents the vital channels in civil society in which individuals and groups can become informed about issues, discuss and debate these issues autonomously, and ultimately have impact on policy agendas." The new communication technologies converging with the media have helped, in terms of the outreach and mass mobilization of the citizenry, in the current constitutional review process, the management of Ebola funds, and the debate on the constitutionality of the recent action of the President on relieving the Vice-President of his duties and appointing another. Pictures and sounds of those events were shared among the users – journalists included – of these networks.

Ethical considerations in journalism are imperative but one of the crucial issues at the time of writing is how to address the ethical dilemma emerging as a result of the proliferation of ICTs in media

packaging. The idea of citizen journalism or amateur journalism is a threat to ethical orientation and application of standards in reporting issues. Some audiences are even confusing facts and opinions because they cannot distinguish between blogging and independent reporting.

Several concerns are coming regarding the need to regulate social media in order to protect people's privacy, dignity and public safety. Mohamed F. Kargbo commenting in a radio programme said: "Government and the public should bear in mind the anti-social effect of social media on public discourse and thus should be working on democratic means of regulating it..."

Using video footages for factual reporting is another consideration. Unedited horror images are aired on occasion. The SLBC television current affairs programme, *We Yus*, for example, does this sometimes.

In the final analysis, there is the tendency to manipulate true public opinion on national discourse. There are several texters' clubs whose members are paid to send in text messages to every radio programme in order to propagate the position or interest of the sponsor. The same goes for phone-in programmes. The text readers also read the chain in order to make claims to mobile companies on text numbers used.

Going on the social media too there are prominent political operatives who are members of almost all groups discussing issues and at times their discussions make the agenda for the mainstream media.

The media reform idea to the above situation is to increase public knowledge about the use of new emerging information and communication technologies for public discourse on development and democracy by processing information they consider worthy for their consumption. Another consideration is making media reporting and reporters digital through capacity building.

*Tonya Musa is Head of Department Mass Communications, FBC.*



*By Dr Victor Massaquoi*

## Press Freedom and the Law

The Constitution of any country, including Sierra Leone, is the supreme law of the land! It has the ultimate authority to regulate the administration of the country, especially on controversial issues and the conduct of citizens, including public officers. Contained in it are fundamental state policies and laws that guarantee certain rights, privileges and freedoms – some entrenched. It also defines certain obligations and demand responsibilities from citizens and others who enjoy or benefit from those rights, privileges and freedoms in return.

On the other hand, the 1965 Public Order Act of Sierra Leone (POA) is a legislation designed to regulate those behaviors of the citizens of Sierra Leone and other residents assumed to be counterproductive to the stability of the state and comfort of others.

Chapters 4 and 5 of the 1991 Constitution - which is being reviewed, clearly stipulate the fundamental obligations of the Government to the citizenry and the principles of justice, democracy and freedom, respectively. But the most striking aspects, with respect to the Constitution and the Public Order Act, are Sections 11, 15 and 25 of the former.

Section 11 deals with the obligations of the mass media. It provides as follows: “The press, radio and television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in the Constitution and highlight the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.”

Section 15 recognises and protects the fundamental human rights and

freedoms of the individual. It states: “Whereas every person in Sierra Leone is entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual...but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest...”

Section 25 is about the protection of freedom of expression and the press. It states as follow: “Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression...freedom to hold opinions, and receive and impart ideas and information without interference...freedom to own, establish and operate any medium for dissemination of information, ideas and opinions...”

If one attempts a simple comparison of the above provisions with those draconian aspects of “part five” of the Public Order Act (POA), one will discover that they are clearly at odds. For example, Sections 26-36 criminalize libel and slander, contrary to specifically mentioned sections in the Constitution. This means that you can be charged, fined and/or imprisoned if convicted, sometimes even for factual reporting.

For example, section 28:2 of “part five” of the POA reads: “Where the alleged libel contains several charges, and the accused fails in proof of the truth of any one of the matters alleged in it, or where the alleged libel is general and the accused fails to prove so much of the plea under this section as would justify the libel, the Court shall find the accused guilty, and it shall be competent for the Court, in pronouncing sentence, to consider whether the guilty of the accused is aggravated or mitigated by the said plea...”

During the last decade, a number of articles have been published and arguments advanced from various sources on the internet, newspapers, books, radio and television stations on the archaic and draconian nature of the POA and the need for its repeal, or at worst, its review.

Therefore, in analyzing the state of the

media in Sierra Leone for 2014 in relation to the POA, it is worthy to highlight and critically examine and evaluate some really disturbing incidents, in which the POA was invoked, including arrests, detentions, harassments and intimidations; and lay out the divergence of the two legislations and their implications for freedom of expressions, not only for media practitioners, but also for other members of the public.

In 2014, this despised part of the Act was invoked many times by the Police, other public officers and ill-motivated individuals. Over a dozen journalists including media practitioners, a musician and a researcher, were seriously affected. In fact, some still continue to suffer unjustly in the cold and wicked hands of the POA.

Here are four samples of how the POA was invoked in 2014:

a. “Music Producer Attacked, Threatened for Songs on Corruption and Tribalism”. According to reports from the Media Foundation of West Africa, based in Ghana, Joseph Richard Abdulai was attacked by unknown assailants in early 2014 for producing an album “... which features songs by some musicians in the country on mineral exploitation, corruption and tribalism.”

b. “Researcher Harassed in Kambia”. Abdul Conteh, an Agricultural researcher was harassed by Police in Kambia in early 2014 for investigating anomalies in the former Rice Research Station at Rokupr, according to reports by the victim and others in Kambia.

c. “Sierra Leone: Journalist Arrested and Detained on Presidential Order Released on Bail”, according to the West Africa Media Foundation.

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## Press Freedom and the Law

From P 7

Dr. David Tam-Baryoh, host of a popular radio show, Monologue, was arrested and detained, for several days for producing a program deemed insightful. He was finally released after posting bail of 100 million Leones. He was released according to reports by “orders from above” and on medical grounds.

d. “Sierra Leone: Journalist Fined for Entering Ebola Quarantine Zone”. Ibrahim J. Ganda was charged to court in Kenema in August 2014 and was fined 1 million Leones for illegally entering a Quarantine Home. He was released and returned to Liberia after paying the fine.

The application of the law in such circumstances no doubt contravenes the Constitution and falls short of other international human rights laws and standards as earlier indicated. Imagine, for simply expressing one's views with facts, using appropriate and legal channels of expression, as guaranteed by the Constitution, one is harassed, intimidated, arrested, charged, fined and even jailed.

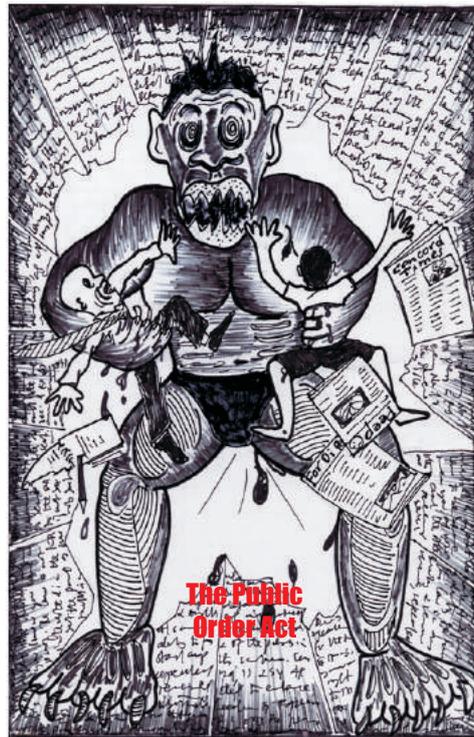
The President of the Sierra Leone Association Journalists, Kelvin Lewis, in a fumed reaction in 2014, said “we do not need part five of the POA but a nicely crafted media law that can be implemented by a competent and respected Independent Media Commission.”

People within and without the country have argued that Sierra Leone is an emerging and budding democracy and should not be compared with other countries in the West with respect to the enjoyment of democracy and human rights and freedoms. This cannot be agreed with on three grounds.

First, Sierra Leone is part of the globalization we trumpet and we have signed and domesticated many

international legal instruments, which must be complied with after ratification by Parliament;

Second, as a country, when we seek support/assistance - financial or otherwise, from international financial and non-financial organizations and developed countries abroad, we present policies, programs and reports framed in internationally accepted standards; and



Finally, we reference other countries with good practices in our speeches and behaviors, so why use a different yardstick to measure the state of governance in our country and of our human rights and freedom records?

It therefore goes without saying that the Constitution supersedes any other statute or policy. It is also clear that The POA, especially Part V is not only out dated, but vindictive, and a clear violation of section 177 of the national Constitution that any other written law must conform or be aligned with.

One may also conclude that the POA is impeding because it puts a serious strain on the ability of media practitioners, researchers, educationists and others to hold government accountable, and

investigate and report on salient issues to the development of the country, because under the application of this Act even truth does not seem to be a defence, not to talk about facts.

Since Sierra Leone is a signatory to many international legal instruments that guarantee basic human rights, such as the 1963 OAU (now African Union) Charter and the 1986 Banjul Charter on Human Rights, and that of the UN, a clear clause must be enshrined in the revised national Constitution that would render expunged or useless the specific provisions of the POA that are averse to the basic right to freedom of expression.

This is particularly because the POA was passed into law some 50 years ago and the context then vastly different from current realities. It is therefore but fitting to review the entire Act, including decriminalizing libel and slander.

That way, in addition to the operationalization of the Right to Access Information Commission and full implementation of the Right to Access Information Act, interested parties, including researchers, educationists, students and media practitioners would gain access to important and needed pieces of information that would aid accuracy, balance and credibility of a story or report.

In such circumstance, any alleged breach of libel or slander law shall be redressed in a competent court of law and treated as a civil matter, where damages could be paid if the court so desires.

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## Government, the Media and Control

*By Ahmed Sahid Nasralla*

It was Thomas Jefferson – third President of the United States of America (1801-1809) – who once said that if it were left to him to decide, he would not hesitate to choose “newspapers without a government” rather than “a government without newspapers”. With these words Jefferson underscored the importance of the media in a democracy. That was over a century ago. Since then, democracy has evolved to become the most popular form of contemporary governance and the media continues to play a central role in its success.

In a fledgling democracy like ours, the independent media is even more significant as it should fuel the engine of the democratic vehicle by playing the role of watchdog, providing checks and balances on the three arms of government and ensuring a clear separation of powers. It should also bridge the gap between the government and the people, providing the space for healthy discussions about national issues, and promoting transparent and accountable governance.

Governments, however, invariably visualize a different role for the media; they want a media that will advance their agenda; a media that will ensure that only the voices of politicians are heard over and above engaging in productive dialogue with the people; a media that will not ask too many questions; a media that will drown out dissenting voices and a media that will tell the people what a great job the ruling party is doing and why it must be re-elected – in short, a media that is pro-government and cloaked under the overused cliché of 'partners in development'.

The All People's Congress (APC) government was obviously aware of this 'all-important role' of the media when they assumed the reins of governance in 2007 through the ballot box – a victory many believed was largely enhanced by a favourable media. As payback, the government appointed journalists that had supported

their cause as Information/Press Attaches to its various diplomatic missions abroad, while others were given ministerial positions.

Of Sierra Leone's sixteen diplomatic missions, ten have journalists as Press Attaches. A current special adviser to President Ernest Bai Koroma, Alhaji I.B. Kargbo, is former Minister of Information and Communications and is publisher/owner of the *New Citizen* newspaper. The current deputy Minister of that ministry, Theo Nicol, is a former Managing Director of *Africa Young Voices* radio and newspaper. The deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Sheka Shekito Tarawallie, is the publisher/owner of *The Torchlight* newspaper. The Minister of Sports, Paul Kamara, is the publisher/owner of the *For di People* newspaper. Another journalist, a former Secretary-General of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Ismael Koroma, is the country's deputy Ambassador to Ethiopia. When President Koroma created the position of Special Executive Assistant (SEA) at State House, he appointed Dr. Sylvia Olayinka Blyden, publisher and owner of the well-known *Awareness Times* newspaper. Even though she later resigned from the position, her newspaper largely remains a key



political ally of President Koroma. The country's Minister Plenipotentiary at the UN Mission in New York, the Reverend Kabbs Kanu, is the publisher/owner of the popular online publication, *Cocorioko*. The Press Attaché at the country's High Commission in the UK, Sorie Sudan Sesay, is the publisher/owner of the international quarterly magazine, *Sierra Update*, and *Update* newspaper published locally. A popular columnist, Oswald Hanciles, is adviser to President Koroma on Media Outreach. The deputy Minister of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, Mustapha Bai Atilla, is a former broadcaster with the *Voice of the Handicapped* 96.2 radio. Directly or indirectly, all of these government appointees have an influence on the editorial policies of media houses.

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*Apart from registered political newspapers all newspapers register with the IMC as independent publications*

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Between 2007 and 2015, the Independent Media Commission (IMC), has officially registered over a hundred media houses. It is no hidden secret among practitioners that a good number of these are either owned or bankrolled by politicians to further consolidate the government's influence on the country's media landscape.

"The government has a huge influence over the media, and this is not good for our democracy," says Emmanuel Saffa Abdulai, Executive Director of the Society for Democratic Initiatives (SDI), an organization that was at the forefront in advocating for the passing into law of the Right to Access Information Bill.

He also expresses dissatisfaction that media ownership in the country is now being dominated by politicians of the ruling party.

"They either own the media houses or are bank-rolling them, because they have access to resources. State institutions don't place adverts in the few critical media houses and this is starving the growth of the independent media. Most newspapers and radio stations are poor and so they are covered into reporting favourably on government to benefit from these resources," laments Saffa, who is also the publisher of the *Newswatch* newspaper.

The Minister of Information and Communications, the Honourable Alpha Bakar Kanu, on the other hand, describes government's immense influence as positive: "We are providing the enabling environment for a free and pluralistic media landscape. We have allowed the unfettered proliferation of newspapers and radio and TV stations and we have not jailed a single journalist since coming to power."

He cites the transformation of the

State-owned radio and TV stations to a national broadcaster; the empowerment of the IMC to regulate the media "rather than government clamping down on the media for professional misconduct" and the enactment of the Right to Access Information (RAI) law that led to the creation of the RAI Commission "that will serve as the arbiter between the public and government officials who refuse the media and the citizens access to information in their possession".

"Government has a cordial relationship with the media," the Minister points out. "But that should not be interpreted to mean the government controls most of the media. We respect free speech and the media enjoys the freedom

***There are so many subtle ways governments can influence or control the media without having to send journalists to jail or through the enactment of legislation that limits freedom of expression and of the press.***

accorded them by the Constitution. Our weekly press briefings create room for government interaction with the media thereby proactively giving them information about the activities of government."

Indeed the regulatory framework has been largely liberal except for the highly contested seditious libel provision in the Public Order Act of 1965. This provision has been used by government to suppress not-so-friendly media houses and the police have selectively used it to crack down on unfavourable reporting. Admittedly, no journalist has been jailed after going through the legal process of being tried in court and convicted; however, there have been some notable arrests and detentions like those of Bai Bai Sesay and Jonathan Leigh of The *Independent Observer* newspaper and,

more recently, David Tam Baryoh of the popular good governance program *Monologue*. This has had a chilling effect on media houses and free speech because almost all of those arrested were eventually released with no convincing explanation for their detention.

Reacting to this worrying trend, Valnora Edwin, Director of Campaign for Good Governance says: "The arrest of journalists in recent months has raised concerns about state/media relationships and the need to enhance freedom of expression. This trend also calls to question rights issues, promoting democracy and enhancing good governance. Narrowing the space

will limit the participation of the vulnerable and marginalized, and breed discontent with the resultant recourse to violence. Inasmuch as those rights should be exercised within the ambit of the law and are not absolute, intimidating journalists to the point where programs are stopped and fear sets in, calls for an urgent review of press freedom."

Similar sentiments are shared by Ibrahim Tommy, Executive Director for Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL)-Sierra Leone: "Sierra Leone's media landscape is not the worst in the world, but it could be much better. The government has apparently succeeded in using a variety of tactics, including intimidation, to cover a good number of journalists into submission."

"Where intimidation has failed," he observes, "there seems to be a deliberate effort to undermine the viability of the independent media. The overall effect is that the independent media has gone into 'self-censorship overdrive' and a

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# Gender Representation within the Media

*By Williette PRO James*

*In this article, the writer takes an introspective view of the media in Sierra Leone. She assesses gender representation on several fronts and relates it to the depiction of women's sexuality in media contents and low visibility and status of female journalists within the Sierra Leone media.*

The gender concept is essential in dealing with the issue of representation. To every extent, gender serves as the basic category that we use to classify things. Media tend to use the masculine and feminine gender to categorise not only humans, but also objects. Those groupings, at the end of the day, go with “an awareness of what constitutes 'appropriate' characteristics”. (Advanced Studies in Media – Nicholas & Price, 1998)

Advertising characterises the typical masculine as tough, hard, and the typical feminine as soft and fragile. All the more reason why when a product like a 'table' is being marketed, the 'appropriate' characteristics are ascribed to it – hence the way it is represented in the media.

Media contents play a vital role in defining perceptions. The thought processes of individuals and how they go about associating with each other are, to a large extent, reformed by the media. How media portray issues and/or individuals on one hand, and how media consumers interpret them on the other hand, clearly define representation.

An opinion exists that the selection of media contents within the newsroom is largely determined by the gender of news managers. Many believe that when women are managers, they give precedence to women's issues, and men, to political and economic stories. However, one is tempted to refer to these thoughts as stereotypical. From observation, the trend of issues published in two major news entities in

Freetown, whose control mechanisms are influenced by women – the Awareness Times newspaper and Radio Democracy FM 98.1 – proves that their major publications and programmes are largely based on political issues.

Another school of thought advanced the forgoing argument on representation in terms of numbers. It asserts that numbers play a greater role in the selection of media contents. That is to say, a large number of women working in the newsroom will influence not only the issues published, but the extent to which women's sexuality is being represented in media contents. Media Awareness Network 2009 (online) citing a study done in France by the Association of Women Journalists (Association des femmes journalistes—AFJ 2000) states that “French television devotes five to nine per cent more news coverage to women than do the other media—clearly the result of more women journalists working in television than in the radio and newspaper industries.” The Sierra Leone situation reflects the opposite. The state broadcaster, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, for example, has quite a good number of female journalists, yet women's issues receive minuscule broadcast air.

Globally, the field of journalism has not attracted many women. According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ- 2001), “Thirty- eight percent of all working journalists are women.” In Sierra Leone the gender disparity is huge. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) 2015 register, records that women constitute just 15.6% percent of the 880 registered journalists. This low representation of female journalists means that except they work harder, their visibility will remain low. Pondering that for a while, one is tempted to assess gender representation within the media in Sierra Leone, in terms of visibility, on several other fronts.

Women in Sierra Leone are unduly affected by a lot of issues, including access to higher education. Only a few women in journalism in Sierra Leone



have the requisite educational background to practise journalism. Acting Head of the Mass Communication Department at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Hindolo Tonya Musa, stated among several other reasons, that a small number of women in the country gain access into the Department as opposed to men, even though most of both sexes do not end up practising the profession. One reason some journalists put forward for not opting for university qualifications in journalism is that the entry requirements are rigid. However, to address the issue, a Special Certificate in Mass Communication was introduced by the University of Sierra Leone but, even then, only a few journalists applied for it. This lack of response aroused questions as to whether unqualified journalists were, in fact, actually serious about acquiring a higher level qualification in journalism.

Even though higher educational qualification is essential, access to constant capacity building is vital if women journalists are to achieve confidence, growth and visibility that will ultimately affect how they are represented within the profession. A week's monitoring of five daily newspapers (Awoko, Premier News, Awareness Times, Concord Times and Standard Times) revealed that only 14 percent of the 65 percent of female journalists belonging to Women in the Media Sierra Leone (WIMSAL), an organization with a membership of 200, employed in these news outlets,

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very weak funding base for independent media institutions, has not been helpful.”

There are so many subtle ways governments can influence or control the media without having to send journalists to jail or through the enactment of legislation that limits freedom of expression and of the press. They can do so, indirectly, through the provision of career motivations for journalists. They can ensure that some journalists or media houses develop an advantage by getting 'scoops' and 'inside source information', political favours, through extensive government advertising and even financial incentives designed to induce compliance.

In extreme cases a government can keep a 'red file' on every unsympathetic journalist or media house, releasing tarnishing information when such journalists or media houses write anything that might show the government in an unfavourable light. Government can also appoint their own people from among practitioners and professionals to head national or public media institutions – the appointments of the heads of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Right to Access Information Commission are obvious examples of this.

But should government/media relations always play the cat and mouse game? Is the appointment of journalists to public offices undermining the independence of the media and, by implication, democracy?

John Baimba Sesay, Press Attaché to Sierra Leone's Embassy in China, doesn't think so: “There has been a missing link between the media and past governments, breeding some kind of suspicious relationship. The appointment of journalists to public offices by the APC Government has

helped in giving greater value to the profession which, in turn, gives the good impression that the government knows the value of the media and its practitioners. This has fostered a good relationship between the local media and the government.”

Furthermore, Sesay observes that the government believes the media has a great role to play in governance. “Sierra Leoneans are learning about activities of their nation's various diplomatic missions abroad through our regular reporting as Press Attaches. We have also helped to build a positive image of our country abroad.”

Nevertheless, the Sierra Leone media still needs to do a lot to deliver on its mandate to disseminate news in an objective and impartial way and the government has a responsibility to provide the right climate for this to happen. However, Ibrahim Tommy thinks the jury is still out on whether the government is effectively delivering on its mandate.

Apart from registered political newspapers (We Yone and Unity, for example), all newspapers register with the IMC as independent publications, but the discerning reader can easily identify which ones are pro-government, pro-opposition and the few that are actually independent. The recent Auditor-General's Report on the use of Ebola funds and the sacking of the country's Vice-President and appointment of a replacement, exposed the polarisation of the media with a good number serving as surrogates for politicians and political parties. The media most vocal in providing critical reporting on these two considerably topical issues are opposition media, and understandably so.

Consequently, what the traditional media practitioners have failed to do, in terms of holding the government accountable, has been

taken over by social media platforms and other micro blogs. They are proving to be hard nuts to crack because they are largely unregulated by local laws.

Unlike its predecessor, the current government gives high premium to the management of information and communication on all fronts, and social media was incorporated as part of an integrated communications infrastructure comprising State House Communications Unit (SHCU), and the Ministry of Information and Communications under which is the Office of the Government Spokesman.

“We have been very successful so far by operating a daily proactive and reactive press service and a multi media program that ensure the uploading of audiovisual material on the official State House website and all social media channels,” maintains Jara Kawusu Conteh, Acting Director of Communications at State House. However, he says some of the challenges are sometimes the very slow or poor Internet connections and the fact that “People use pseudonyms to hide their identity, especially on Facebook and WhatsApp, when they attack government or peddle irresponsible propaganda.”

But there's a bigger challenge when it comes to preventing or influencing opposing and critical view points. Social media outlets, despite their many unprofessional shortcomings, have been quite instrumental in communicating to even the most remote areas of the country. They help broaden the space for democratic discourse and the exchange of alternative views. Here, unlike traditional media, the owners are the people themselves, and the 'practitioners' come in all shapes, sizes and colours.

Where do we go from here? Batilloi Warritay, a Communication for Development Specialist, asserts:

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## SLBC and its Public Service Mandate

By *Mustapha M. K. Sesay*

Any attempt to assess the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) with regards the exercise of its public service mandate will revolve around whether it is a public service broadcaster, or the same old state broadcaster with a new name - old wine in new bottle.

Though the SLBC has a more robust and liberal mandate, it is also a state establishment, which, unlike its predecessor, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service, is a creature of statute (The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Act No 1 of 2010).

Therefore, before assessing its performance over the years, with special focus on 2014 - four years after its creation, it is necessary to be clear as to what is generally considered to be 'a public service broadcaster'.

A Public Service Broadcaster is supposed to be an independent, impartial and non-commercial radio and/or television station, usually established by government to serve, advance and safeguard public interest and help shape public opinion.

In his book, 'The Fall and Decline of Public Service Broadcasting', Michael Tracey identified eight fundamental principles as the framework for PSB. These include, Universality of Availability, Universality of Appeal, Serving the Public Sphere, Creation of an Enlightened Citizenry and Insulated from vested political and commercial interests.

Gerard Igyor, in his presentation to Africast 2000 (an annual Broadcasting Conference hosted by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission), 'Pubcasting in Nigeria', largely agrees with Tracey.

The SLBC Act, among other things, guarantees the broadcaster's editorial independence, as well as 'insulating' it from political and commercial interests, at least on paper; and also restricts both the level of advertising and clientele:

- Provide, as a public service, independent and impartial broadcasting services for general reception throughout Sierra Leone, which will include a minimum level of regional programmes broadcast nationally every week;

- Allow and accept limited sponsorship for programmes and advertisement, with the exemption of sponsorship for news programmes or from political, ethnic or religious groups or institutions.

Its creation was highly prized by the UN, which intended it to be an independent and impartial model, worthy of emulation by other countries.

Considering Sierra Leone's lively and diverse media landscape, these functions constitute, to a reasonable extent, elements of a public service broadcaster, though they are somewhat weakened by the provision for acceptance of paid advertising.

The SLBC was therefore expected not only to be independent and well-liked, but also to be the most credible and trusted broadcaster, especially for local broadcast contents and quality coverage.

The corporation was created out of the former SLBS, and the assets of the former UN Radio transferred to the new entity.

Sputnik Kalambi, the late former UN Radio Station Manager, disclosed, among other things, that 'a substantial chunk of money has been set aside for the SLBC which will take care of the first three months of operation'.

Eventually, however, the UN ended up bankrolling the transition process and the broadcaster's earlier operations for one full year. Thus, SLBC inherited all the personnel, assets and liabilities of SLBS, along with the assets and remaining local staff of UN Radio, which ceased broadcasting in March 2010.

Section 10 (1) of the SLBC Act mandates it 'to provide information, education, entertainment and reflect



all shades of opinion throughout Sierra Leone', which is also an important public service element.

This point was underscored by UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon who jointly commissioned the corporation with President Ernest Bai Koroma; who, on behalf of Government, pledged commitment to its independence.

The then Information Minister, Ibrahim Ben Kargbo also re-echoed the same commitment by the President.

"We have undertaken the merger in good faith so that we would have an effective broadcaster that will benefit everybody. The government will make sure that it remains independent and caters for all shades of opinion. The government will have no say in how it is run".

In what appeared to be a determined effort towards fulfilling this mandate, the SLBC crafted a very ambitious vision statement: 'to be recognised as the best broadcaster in Africa and among the best in the world' - a vision which everyone must have been proud of.

However, judging from its four-year performance, especially in the matter of upholding the cardinal principles of objectivity and fairness, especially at those crucial times of controversial national decision-making, how has the corporation fared on?

"We are doing fine, giving fair coverage to the Government and the public, but our major challenge is operational finance," said Thomas Sowa, the Admin and Human Resource Officer.

This statement was re-echoed by the Director General, Elvis Gbanabom Hallowell, which, he said, compelled the institution to focus on advertising and promotional returns that would augment revenue.

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# Broadcast Pluralism: In Search of Standards

*By James Tamba Lebbie*

Sierra Leone has come a long way in terms of standards in broadcasting; nevertheless, we still have some distance to go as an industry.

I shall begin by exploring the meaning of pluralism in media generally and in broadcasting specifically. I shall then go on to look at broadcast standards in the context of media pluralism from three key areas: editorial standards; technical quality, and management – this area has to do with the governance aspect of the industry. Finally, I shall attempt to draw the nexus between pluralism and standards.

Pluralism, according to Gillian (2010), is usually associated with diversity in the media. It is about the presence of a number of different and independent voices, and of different political opinions and representations of different cultures within the media. Invariably, citizens expect and need a diversity and plurality of media contents and media sources.

The need for pluralism and diversity is sometimes associated with the more fundamental rights to freedom of expression as set out in many National Constitutions and regional and international Declarations, Conventions, and Treaties. For instance, the European Convention's Committee of Experts on Media Concentration and Pluralism defines pluralism as "The diversity of media supply, reflected, for example, in the existence of a plurality of independent and autonomous media and a diversity of media contents available to the public."

According to this definition, pluralism is about diversity within what is made available, rather than within what is actually consumed. It is about public access to a range of voices and a range of contents, irrespective of patterns of demand. This definition of pluralism embraces diversity of ownership (i.e. the existence of a variety of separate and autonomous media suppliers) and

diversity of output (i.e. varied media contents). It is important to distinguish between these two concepts.

A related distinction is sometimes drawn between external and internal pluralism. External pluralism exists when there is a range of suppliers (diverse and independent ownership), whereas internal pluralism (i.e. pluralism within the media entity), is about diversity of content. The latter might be achieved through laws and regulations encouraging diversely sourced, unbiased output.

Generally, the concept of pluralism comprises two aspects: political and cultural. Political pluralism is about the need, in the interest of democracy, for a range of political opinions and viewpoints to be represented in the media. The argument is that democracy would be threatened if any single voice, with the power to propagate a single political viewpoint, were to become dominant on the media landscape. Cultural pluralism on the other hand, is about the need for a variety of cultures reflecting the diversity within society, to find expression in the media. Cultural diversity and social cohesion may be threatened unless the cultures and mores of all groupings, including minorities, are reflected in the media.

An analysis of this definition in the context of Sierra Leone's broadcast media landscape could lead to the following observations: that the number of radio stations, especially in the capital, Freetown, has grown exponentially, thus ensuring external pluralism. What cannot be said with the same degree of precision, though, is that the proliferation of media houses in the country has ensured quality standards in broadcasting. The picture presented is certainly a mixed bag. There is no doubt that the multiplicity of radio stations has created increased access to media contents. However, a critical look reveals that broadcast media contents are not as diverse as the number of



radio stations operating in the country. A number of factors could be responsible for this. First, not all radio stations are in the business of news and current affairs programming because it is an expensive activity. For that reason, those radio stations involved in news and current affairs programming are struggling to produce and broadcast quality contents. Government media houses, for instance, tend to rely on government ministries, departments and agencies, and non-governmental organisations for press conferences and press releases for news and programmes. In other words, any content analysis of broadcast media products will reveal that a variety of sources – a key requirement of internal pluralism – is missing.

There is also another side to this issue of media houses relying so heavily on press conferences and press statements for news and programmes. Media scholar Oscar Gandy, among others, has criticized the process by which public relations practitioners subsidize media costs and reporters' time by providing news releases and other information to make reporters' jobs easier. According to these critics, the disservice is that many organisations, including social movements, nonprofits and disadvantaged groups, lack the resources to provide these "subsidies." As a result, Gandy and others say, the media may perpetuate information inequalities in society, and Sierra Leone is no exception to this.

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## Broadcast Pluralism: In Search of Standards

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Thus, while there is no denying that Sierra Leone enjoys some form of external pluralism because of the existence of a variety of separate and autonomous media suppliers, broadcasters have to do quite a bit more to achieve internal pluralism – the diversity of contents and sources.

Standards can be looked at from the perspectives of editorial, technical and management standards, among other considerations. A thorough analysis of these factors will reveal a very mixed picture. Editorial standards have to do with the quality of media products. In this regard, one cannot deny the fact that some gains have been made in terms of standards in broadcasting. On the one hand, the argument can be made that multiple and autonomous media suppliers, coupled with several training courses on the basics of journalism and programme production by several actors in the industry have contributed to raising the level of editorial standards. Of course, multiple media houses also means a fragmentation of the audience, which puts pressure on media operators to make better products to attract advertisers.

The movement of trained and experienced staff from mainstream media institutions to public relations-related outfits due to (and including, but not limited to), poor or non-existent conditions of service, means that the vacuum is often filled by poorly-trained or untrained and inexperienced practitioners. This transition ultimately has a very telling effect on the quality of the media products coming from radio and television stations. It manifests itself in the form of superficial treatment of issues, one-dimensional interview techniques, and news items peppered with opinion. Therefore, if one concentrates only on the multiplicity of broadcast media outlets in the country and, by extension, the increased access to listeners or viewers, there will be the tendency not



*Democracy would be threatened if there is only one view point*

to see the forest for the trees.

The case of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation which, until recently, used to be the country's only television station, is a case in point. It is supposed to operate as a public service enterprise, yet it displays all the trappings of a government-controlled mouthpiece. Until the establishment of Star TV, AYV TV, which currently are in their embryonic stage, there was no TV pluralism – either external or internal – and editorial contents were substandard, at best.

In terms of technical quality, it is perhaps fair to say that a relative degree of improvement in standards have been achieved, especially if one should assess this sub-sector against the backdrop of the grim realities that existed in the broadcasting landscape up to late 2000. There is no denying the fact that now there has been some improvement technically to the extent that the line between technology and content has become somewhat blurred. For instance, for production

purposes, the use of digital recorders and computers/laptops accompanied by audio editing software in many radio stations has helped to improve on the sound quality of broadcast contents. Similarly, in terms of on-air/broadcast output, some significant changes have also taken place. For example, the requirement by the telecoms regulator, NATCOM, that cavity filters be used to protect radio frequencies, and the use of sound processors, among other modern equipment, in some radio stations across the country have helped to boost standards.

But perhaps one can also put forward the argument that the greater percentage of technological contribution is towards content, although that does not seem to have enhanced quality. The emergence of digital social media platforms like Face book, Twitter, and WhatsApp, among others, has facilitated real time and speedy reporting of issues and events across the country.

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These platforms have, without doubt, cut down on production costs and have added currency to news and programmes. But they are a double-edged sword. On their flip side, social media platforms have encouraged laziness in journalism. Some reporters and even gatekeepers are losing their creativity in news gathering by relying increasingly on social media contents to fill airtime. The unfortunate side of it is that some don't even bother to cross check some of the information sent to those platforms before using them.

The third and final aspect of broadcasting standards I will focus on is management. Pringle et al (1995), posit that "an organizational system, including media entities are composed of people, money, materials, equipment and data, all of which are combined in the accomplishment of some purpose." In the execution of that management function, they state that the manager is responsible for carrying the four basic functions of "planning, organising, influencing or directing, and controlling." Some managers are relatively good at "influencing or directing, and controlling", but are not doing at all well in the area of "planning and organising". At the risk of being accused of subjectivity, I'm inclined to say that the governance system of many radio stations in the country leaves much to be desired. True, many are constrained by serious challenges ranging from pure lethargy to capacity and resources.

Planning, according to Pringle et al, "involves the determination of the stations' objectives, and the plans or strategies by which those objectives are to be accomplished". Organising, they say, "is the process whereby human and physical resources are arranged in a formal structure and responsibilities are assigned to specific units, positions and

personnel." However, with very few exceptions, planning meetings are a rare occurrence in broadcast media houses. And where these meetings do occur, decision-making processes are not participatory; they are authoritarian and sometimes influenced by vested interests. In addition, the concept of designing and practically implementing strategic development plans is non-existent in many broadcast media outfits. Where these strategic plans do exist, they do so only on paper perhaps, for the purpose of satisfying a requirement by the media regulator, the Independent Media Commission (IMC).

Some managers lack the capacity to

carry out their functions effectively, Pringle et al cite Katz as stating that there are "three basic skills which every manager must have in varying degrees, according to their managerial level." These are technical knowledge, managing human resources, and conceptual knowledge.

According to Katz, "Technical skill has to do with knowledge, analytical ability and facility in the use of tools and equipment." Handling human resources has to do with "the ability to work with people and build a cooperative effort" while conceptual skill is "the ability to see the enterprise as a whole and the dependence of one part on the others."

Indeed, very few managers in Sierra Leone can boast of possessing all these qualities. And where they possess some of them, lethargy and/or a nonchalant attitude serves as a major barrier to practically exhibit such knowledge and skills.

One can safely say that Sierra Leone is outstanding in terms of the external indicators of pluralism, which are the existence of multiple and, to some extent, focussed broadcast media operators.

However, a great deal more has to be done to attain internal pluralism. Similarly, in the area of searching for standards, it is also fair to say that while we are doing relatively well in the improvement of technical qualities, we still have a long way to go to achieve exceptional editorial and management standards.

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***However, a critical look reveals that broadcast media contents are not as diverse as the number of radio stations operating in the country***

arrange "human and physical resources" within a formal structure – that is, they don't have organising skills. In fact, structures within many broadcast media houses are deliberately very informal, sometimes to the advantage of the manager and/or media owners. Stories abound of some staff members of radio stations not being on the payroll. This is compounded by the reality of the country's depressed media market in which many managers can't think out of the box to come up with ingenious ways to generate income for the smooth operation of their outlets. This situation, no doubt is making it difficult for managers to arrange both human and physical resources for the good of the entity.

Another aspect of management is the knowledge and skill required by managers of broadcast institutions, and media houses in general. To

# The Print Media in Sierra Leone: Business and Practice

By Tanu Jalloh



In Sierra Leone it's fairly easy to set up, to run, to buy over, to sell, to take over or to close down a newspaper. It is by far the most predictable of business ventures in this country, usually set up on purpose to achieve basic marginal interests. Invariably, newspaper proprietors are more interested in how they are likely to benefit financially from its existence than how the paper will benefit from their acumen. Newspapers are therefore open to being besmirched, usually by corporate or political interests. It is a chaotic practice, at best, probably not adequately regulated by standards because of the seeming divergent approaches to business and practice among practitioners, journalists in particular.

## Silhouette of a Business

Print journalism in Sierra Leone is as old as the trade is on this continent. The BBC World Service recorded that the second English newspaper in Africa was published in this country, a year after Cape Town, South Africa, first did in 1800. It would take some twenty five years more before a third paper was established in Liberia. So, **The Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser** in Freetown remained the European undertakings they were for a quarter of a century, concerned only with matters of government. Maybe we have ignored that false start in our entire search for answers to the perennial question of: "Where did print journalism go wrong in Sierra Leone?" In Sierra Leone there has been no known effort to keep newspaper circulation trends, like what the Audit Bureau of Circulation does in the UK, for example. Not even the Independent Media Commission (IMC), which regulates the media in Sierra Leone, has the wherewithal to ascertain claims of newspaper circulation. Because of this inadequacy, it has been very difficult to establish newspaper business models based on circulation trends. Here, it is newspaper vendors,

most of whom are uneducated, who provide undocumented information in terms of newspaper sales, circulation and trends. Each vendor has his own estimation of which newspapers sell the most. The leader of their 'Elders' Committee', Alimamy Jonathan Sesay, for instance, told me that "*Awareness Times*, has the widest circulation, *The Exclusive* is the fastest selling newspaper, and *News Watch* is the one that has improved the most."

Other vendors maintained that *Awoko*, *Standard Times* and the fairly new *Politico* are topping the 'sales chart' regularly. There are yet others who believe that *The Satellite* is keenly competing with *The Exclusive* because of its Mercury International sports betting pages. Asked what yardstick they use to arrive at these conclusions, the 54-year-old vendor, who boasts of having spent thirty years in the business, told me that they know because they are the ones who distribute/sell the newspapers. "No newspaper sells faster than *The Exclusive* does. *News Watch* is the most improved because it is new on the newsstand and most of our customers have replaced other papers with it in the daily supplies they get from vendors," he asserted.

Sesay admits that they are not in a position to ascertain the number of copies newspapers print. "It is the printers, who are in the production business, who should be able to tell you that," he informed me. However, according to the vendors, they usually receive as many as 2,000 copies from some newspapers and as few as between a hundred and a hundred and fifty from others, for daily distribution. The fact is, Sierra Leone's newspaper industry has not made any seriously sustained effort to establish a more efficient distributing system other than the Sierra Leone Vendors Association, which seems to lack the ambition to expand from its traditional base outside the main entrance of the central Post Office.

Newspapers are mainly sold in the capital Freetown, and even there the reach is largely limited to the central business district. In fact, newspaper houses care less about the circulation of their products than they do for advertisements.

Some of the relatively successful institutions that have so far invested in the print media industry in Sierra Leone would never have survived this long – some starting operations only as recently as 1998 – if they had only relied on adverts, circulation and professionalism. Because of this, in most instances, it is a venture destined to fail. In recent years, the lack of foresight has turned into fear of failure and the result is sacrificing professional standards on the altar of vested interests, in the form of politics, corporations or ego.

Today, the typical success story of a newspaper house is determined by the fact that it owns a printing press, has strong political patronage, gets actual corporate sponsorship or is built on a partnership of some sort. It may very well be that some newspapers are benefitting from all of the foregoing forms of capital actions, but this is hard to prove because of the lack of ownership transparency in the newspaper business. However, it is also very possible that some have been able to get bank loans and made good use of them. For example, all of the proprietors I reached claimed to have taken loans, mainly to recapitalise their businesses.

## Ownership Transparency

The Right to Access Information Act, 2013, according to rights activist and head of Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL), Ibrahim Tommy, is not likely to reach its full potential and benefit the public in the immediate future, in part, because of the absence of the required infrastructure, capacity and expertise.

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# The Silent Voice of Ethics in the Sierra Leone Media

By Brian James

Ethics in journalism can be loosely defined as a set of principles and best practice parameters that serve as guidelines to journalists in the execution of their duties. Ethical standards are a subject of constant debate as they are usually predicated on a moral compass, which differs from individual to individual. However, in journalism, there are core ethical principles that practitioners across the board are expected to adhere to. While not strictly a Code of Ethics, the Independent Media Commission's (IMC) Code of Practice describes such ethical principles as truthfulness, decency, accuracy and objectivity. Punitive measures have been put in place for defaulters.

While these principles are outlined for both the print and electronic media, according to IMC Complaints Committee records, the print media has been significantly more ethically challenged. Vendors displaying dozens of colourful newspaper headlines in front of the Sierra Leone Postal Service offices in the centre of town are an almost daily feature. Vying with each other for the limited attention of passers-by, they are an indicator of the high level of competitiveness that exemplifies the newspaper business in the country. Out of sixty registered newspapers, roughly about twenty publish regularly. However, since Sierra Leone is among the poorest and least developed countries in the world, with educational levels being significantly low, the market is too small to make the business highly lucrative. As such, every now and then, newspapers will sidestep ethical principles in an effort to attract attention and sell their publications.

The front page article of the *Standard Times* newspaper of June 12, 2012, was about a leaked sex tape made by two members of the police force while on a peace-keeping mission in Darfur. Screenshots of the tape, depicting the female officer's nude form, were splashed across the front page, making the issue the talk of the town. The public was divided as to whether the

newspaper was right to publish the article – some felt the privacy of the individuals involved should have been respected – while others felt that the tape's contents were a matter of public interest. The predominant view from both sides of the debate however, particularly among media professionals, was that the photos were pornographic and unethical. Nonetheless, the publication succeeded in grabbing the attention of newspaper buyers countrywide, which may have been the primary intention behind the front page images.

More common, is the vilification of public officials and high profile individuals that bears little or no factual basis. A typical example of this is an article titled, “Christiana Thorpe is a Criminal” published by *New Storm* newspaper on 27th February 2012. In some cases the media has been used as a battleground for verbal warfare between editors and heads of media institutions. These exchanges are sometimes extremely indecent with the use of blatant sexual innuendoes and abusive language. An article in the *Global Times* newspaper titled: “Sylvia Blyden, Stop Shitting On Decent People” by editor, Sorie Fofanah, on the 23rd March 2011, is one such example. Filled with abusive language against Sylvia Blyden the Proprietor of another newspaper, *Awareness Times*, the article attracted equally unprofessional rejoinders from another newspaper, *The Senator*. These publications, though the written equivalent of market-place verbal exchanges, attract the attention of the public some of whom eagerly follow the back and forth ripostes. It is obvious that some of these newspaper 'beefs' are attention-grabbing and carry moneymaking intent. Consequently, common elements of media codes of ethics such as truthfulness, accuracy and good taste are cast aside in order to negatively influence public opinion and settle personal scores.

The Mass Communications Unit at Fourah Bay College was started in 1993. Since then over two hundred students have graduated with a first degree in the course. However, this is

not proportionately represented in the number of practicing journalists in the country. While there have been myriad media training programmes organized by various local entities, the fact remains that the number of practicing journalists with a substantive background in Media Studies or Mass Communication remains small. Secretary-General of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), Moses Kargbo laments that, “After graduation, some of them start off working at media houses but then later branch off into other occupations. Very few remain in the profession.”

As mentioned earlier, the market for newspaper journalism is quite small so few newspaper houses are able to pay their staff well. This results in a number of problems. With the majority of students who graduate in Mass Communication gravitating towards better paid jobs as Public Relations or Communication Officers in local companies and local or international NGOs, it means that many who are currently in the profession have not had training in ethics. They therefore lack knowledge on the importance of correct ethical practices.

The few Mass Communication graduates that do seek employment in the field of journalism face challenges that make it difficult for them to put into practice the ethical principles they have been taught at University.

A young reporter will almost always find himself working under a 'seasoned' editor who is so set in his ways that the reporter feels pressured to operate in unethical ways. Objectivity, for example, is both a professional and ethical journalistic principle. Being objective in news reporting can be even more challenging, especially when it comes to political issues. The majority of newspapers in Sierra Leone are openly affiliated with political parties and will verbally attack opposing parties and



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# The Print Media in Sierra Leone: Business and Practice

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Besides, there seem to be no known statutory or regulatory attempts aimed at ensuring newspaper ownership transparency in Sierra Leone. For example, the Act that established the Independent Media Commission (IMC), does not seek to ensure accountable ownership.

Said Mark Thompson of the Open Society Foundations at a 2013 conference in Brussels: “The availability of accurate and up-to-date data about media ownership is an essential attribute of a democratic and pluralist media system. Market power cannot be understood or assessed – or effectively regulated – if media authorities and citizens do not know who owns the media in their society. Excessive media concentrations cannot be addressed – or even be identified – unless ownership is fully disclosed. Public knowledge of owners' identities,” he emphasised, “helps to ensure that abuses of media power can be assessed, publicised, openly debated and even prevented.”

To date, there have been no significant efforts to reveal the identity of newspaper owners' in a bid to prevent abuse of media power in Sierra Leone. As at the time of this investigation, the only statutory media regulatory body in the country neither has any such authority, as provided for in the statutory instrument that established it, nor has it any known initiative to ensure ownership transparency. IMC does not want to be seen to be too tough in their requirements for the establishment of a newspaper. A former commissioner once claimed that stringent conditions could amount to denying the applicant their rights to own and run a media house.

Because of this, it has been very difficult for the IMC to ascertain ownership transparency and take action, or to prove where there has been a case of false declaration or misrepresentation as provided for under Section 30(1) of the IMC Act 2000. This is because Sections 28 and 29 of the same Act, which prefaced Section

30, have not only been vague in their meanings, but have also constituted a recipe for noncompliance by potential and substantive newspaper owners. In my view, this inertia in the IMC has given rise to a general ownership style that has resulted in the way editorial policies and newspaper contents have been orientated at the expense of transparency and accountability.

## A Practice in Need

Despite all of that, there are more newspapers being registered today. “The number of newspapers publishing in Sierra Leone has grown briskly in recent years, despite a fragile economy and high illiteracy” (InterMedia, 2010).

Editor of Politico newspaper, Kemo Cham, quoting an IMC study in a 2013 article, said: “Between 2007 and 2009 the print media expanded from 12 to 33. By the end of 2009 only 31% of them were still in operation. There are now 67 registered publications. Add those on the waiting list for licensing and those that have been 'dying off and resurrecting', and you will get about 90”.

Cham maintained it is hard to give accurate figures because most publishers do not renew their registrations. In 2012 the Media Sustainability Index, an annual survey, said there were 74 registered newspapers of which only 25 published regularly. By October 2013 the number of registered publications had risen to 91, according to the Independent Media Regulator (IMR).

Consequently, the number of journalists and related media practitioners keeps swelling. As it does, so also do concerns around the ethical and moral conduct of industry players. This is because “...unlike other professionals whose roles are more clearly defined, journalists have been left on their own to work out their roles and determine their

ethics.” (Doing Ethics in Journalism, 1993).

Secretary-General of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, Moses Kargbo, says their membership has reached 900 as at April, 2015. “Less than 10% of journalists at managerial level have really actually read, understood and internalised the media code of practice. Generally, less than 50 per cent of all practitioners know about it,” says Francis Sowa, a Commissioner at the IMC and lecturer in media law at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, the country's print media industry commands some amount of power, although capacity is very low among practitioners who deliver on some of its mandates in a liberal society. That is largely the reason it is still not an attractive business for the average investor. In the same way, newspaper journalism is also fast becoming less of an incentive for skilled and professionally trained practitioners. Today, a good chunk of those with formal training, usually from the journalism school at Fourah Bay College, have diverted to careers in public relations and marketing communications. There are many reasons for this diversion, maybe still not a radical move for the career practitioners who choose to diversify. It seems the only exception is politics. This notion is largely informed by the fact that all trained mass communicators are already journalists. Unfortunately, rather than the norm it is fast becoming the alternative.

While one is very hopeful that more university-trained mass communicators will eventually embark on journalism, and other related advocacy occupations that are typical for journalists, I don't see that happening in the next five years.

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## SLBC and its Public Service Mandate

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Research findings however indicate that public confidence in the SLBC is waning, with public opinion weighing against its claims of independence and impartiality. The corporation stands accused of either failing to uphold its mandate and being partisan or bias, like the old SLBS, in its news coverage and reporting, especially during controversial moments.

'The SLBC is still struggling to meet the huge public expectation that followed the transformation into a corporation...' said Ibrahim Tommy, Executive Director, Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL).

In the opinion of Valnora Edwin, Coordinator, Campaign for Good Governance, 'the SLBC does not meet its requirements as stated in the [SLBC] Act. Though it also captures some private sector activities, it focuses a lot more on government programmes'.

Sulaiman Banja Tejan-sie, Secretary General of the main opposition Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), said the SLBC has been displaying double standards, and 'therefore faces a serious credibility crisis.'

'During normal times as 2014, it behaves like a public service broadcaster at some point and state broadcaster at the other, but during elections or other controversial periods, it becomes partisan and

completely bias against the opposition or critical voices in favour of the ruling party', he said.

To determine what the real truth about the SLBC is, it is necessary to briefly explore the broadcast media landscape.

The importance of the traditional electronic media, comprising radio, TV and direct-to-home (DTH/DSTV) in Sierra Leone cannot be emphasised. This fact is acknowledged by the Independent Media Commission (IMC) which regulates the media generally.

According to its Media Code of Practice, the electronic media 'constitutes the most effective means of reaching the largest number of people simultaneously'.

The Final Report of the European Union Election Observer Mission in Sierra Leone in 2012 states that 'Radio remains the most widespread and effective means of communication nationwide'.

According to its media monitoring findings, '...in key areas such as news bulletins and election related programmes, SLBC showed significant quantitative imbalance in favour of the ruling [APC] party'.

Critical voices were mostly censored and ruling party political patronage became the hallmarks of the institution.

Similar concerns were expressed by a number of other election observer

missions regarding the SLBC, including the local National Elections Watch. But the corporation refused to own up to this, and instead hit back at its critics.

The SLBC therefore failed to operate fully within its public service mandate at the time.

The appointments of the DG and his deputy were also controversial issues, because it was generally believed that they lacked both the requisite academic qualifications and experience in broadcasting. This is in view of the fact that both competed against candidates who were well known to be more competent, better qualified and more experienced, professionally.

Perhaps, this explains why the SLBC is still struggling in terms of fulfilling its mandate. But Hollowell dismissed this as being part of a campaign of calumny against him and his administration.

Moreover, even where the Act stipulates that the SLBC must not accept sponsorship for news programmes or from political, ethnic or religious groups or institutions, the corporation has been accused of violating this provision over the years, but Management also dismissed this as false allegations designed to tarnish its integrity.

It is worth noting that during the period under review, radio remained the most popular news and information medium, reaching the most diverse local audience and contributed effectively to shaping public opinion.

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## The Print Media in Sierra Leone: Business and Practice

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I believe that when eventually serious businessmen, who consider qualifications, professionalism, experience and merit as conditions for hiring editors, in particular, invest in the media, we will see viability, profitability, professionalism and sanity all attained within five years of that radical change. Once this respectability is realised, we will see more genuine investors recruit the best hands, pay them well and motivate them to practice journalism that matches the best in South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, irrespective of the size of Sierra Leone's market.

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## Gender Representation within the Media

### From P 15

frequently publish news stories. Asmaa James, President of the Association, referred to this state of the capacity of women as “weak”. Thus a “weak” educational background and minimal access to regular capacity building courses, in many ways, account for women's low participation in every aspect of journalism; hence their low visibility and poor representation.

This problem is not peculiar to Sierra Leone. The Media Awareness Network 2009 (online) report on “Women Working in the Media” quoted a media watch on this issue: “...though more than half the journalism graduates in Canada are female, studies have shown that only 30 per cent of newspaper articles are written by women.”

Another issue is that of low remuneration. In Sierra Leone, journalists are not paid well. As a result of this low salary, the motivation to publish well-researched pieces is non-existent. Research itself costs time and money, so the option for many journalists who are poorly motivated is to publish work of low standard. Low remuneration is one reason why a female graduate in journalism would choose to work in a public relations outfit where she expects to be paid a decent salary at the end of the month. A graduate in Mass Communication, Jestina Manley, made so bold as to admit: “Working in the media in Sierra Leone will never be an option for me. If I am broke, my plan B would be to go into trading.” Another graduate says: “I would have to be financially desperate to work in the media in Sierra Leone.”

From observation, it is clear that there are only a few media houses in the country that are capable of paying their staff a decent salary. When the question of whether they considered their staff to be well-paid, was posed to ten news institutions, only three replied in the affirmative.

Women's voices are not well-represented in the media, especially in

political commentaries, opinionated pieces, sports or the economy – areas that are considered highly important. Some female journalists have claimed in many fora that they are prevented by their male bosses from covering certain stories considered ‘hard’. Male editors have, however, repeatedly refuted this allegation. One such editor is Moses Kargbo of *Concord Times* newspaper. He believes that few female reporters readily opt to cover hard stories. He opined that, the majority of them are

***Even though higher educational qualification is essential, access to constant capacity building is vital if women journalists are to achieve confidence, growth and visibility that will ultimately affect how they are represented within the profession***

“lazy” and make no effort to rise to the level of handling major tasks. During the one week research mentioned above, only one woman wrote a balanced feature article.

Of all the media houses in Sierra Leone, only *Politico* and *Independent Observer* newspapers, *Mercury radio* and *SLBC* have one female sports reporter each who constantly publishes stories. In the broadcast media, only a few female journalists are bold to discuss political issues. Female print media journalists (with one exception) do not handle political articles. Giving a reason for this apparent lack in the media in Sierra Leone, Zainab Joaque, sports reporter, *Politico* said, “Most female journalists have not developed a niche in political writings; besides, the newsroom editor has a lot to do to guide the reporter on this front.” Josephine Lagawo, reporter, *Salone Times*, explained that the challenge is, most

female journalists are scared of the criminal prosecutions attached to falling foul of some ethical principles when addressing political issues in print. “We are scared of ending up in jail.” There is also the notion that publishing political stories attracts verbal attacks from male journalists who might be on the other side of their political bias. Joenal Sesay, a male reporter at *Salone Times* confirmed the veracity of this statement. One female journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous, pointed to a publication in a local newspaper in which the female journalist, who is versed in handling political issues, was accused of being in a sexual relationship with a political figure. “These sorts of attacks scare some of us away from political discourse,” she emphasized.

Responding to this issue, Editor of *Salone Times*, Donald Theoharding, is of the opinion that female journalists are just not “adventurous”. Moses Kargbo

believes that, “Most female journalists do not publish political issues because they either do not have anything to say or they have, but choose not to get involved in controversial arguments.” Another, drawing reference from the attitude of female journalists in public forums said that many a time when given the opportunity to make their voices heard in public fora, most female journalists choose not to take it. “This is the same attitude they extend to handling politics and other critical issues.”

Ransford Wright, National Coordinator of the *Independent Radio Network (IRN)*, a membership network that broadcasts issue-based programmes of national interest, hammered home the effect of politics on journalism when he said, “A good number of journalists have allowed partisan politics to influence their operations.”

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## SLBC and its Public Service Mandate

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There was proliferation by over 60 commercial, community and religious FM stations on the radio landscape. They had some degree of freedom of expression, thereby subjecting *SLBC* to competition in all the districts in which it operates.

The terrestrial TV broadcast landscape was dominated by the former *SLBS* and remained non-competitive until the private sector started investing in satellite TV or DTH/DSTV.

By 2014, there were only three functioning locally operated TV stations out of the six registered with IMC and allocated frequencies by NATCOM. The others were the less known Africa Independent TV and Kadar Faith TV. Interestingly, the *SLBC* is not registered with the IMC.

“We don't have to register with the IMC, because we are already established by law, I mean, an Act of Parliament,” argued the DG.

The corporation, with two TV channels, eight radio stations and some highly professional staff, therefore maintained competitive advantage over other local broadcast media and satellite relay/transmitting channels like DSTV in the provision of local contents and regional reach.

Its dominance was enhanced by regional stations in Makeni, Kabala, Magburaka, Bo, Kailahun, Kenema and Kono.

The *SLBC* therefore has the potential to be the intended public service broadcaster, provided it acknowledges its shortfalls and is willing to take steps to amend them.

A key element to justify its potential, besides a clause in the Act guaranteeing its independence, is the provision for the Board of Trustees, comprising representatives from key sectors of society, to govern its operations.

It also has a diverse range of public service programmes, including news and current affairs, press review, news in local languages, and educational, health, environmental, sports, music,

religious and children's programmes.

“The corporation still has some of the best [local] staff in broadcasting, and some of its programmes are quite useful,” commented Ibrahim Tommy.

During the 2012 multitier elections, the *SLBC*, in a commendable move, offered some amount of free airtime to political parties and local candidates. Thus, a considerable number of contestants had access to it.

Disappointingly, despite these, the *SLBC* proved to be two-faced as most of its main news and programmes were geared towards presenting Government and ruling party in positive light, while being critical of opposition voices.

Even public interest news on government achievements were presented in news bulletins and current affairs programmes with partisan undertones, without regards to its public service mandate, thus displaying key elements of a partisan state media entity, including bias and unfair coverage and reporting.

In 2014, *SLBC* operated primarily like a state broadcaster in news coverage and current affairs programming, doing public relations and promotional for Government and the ruling party. Nevertheless, it operated like a public service broadcaster in its general programming, including reporting on public interest issues, such as the response to the Ebola outbreak.

However, the corporation remained generally frail, especially in terms of its overall administration and output, which could be attributed to a number of challenges, ranging from management and administrative to high staff turnover, poor transmission, government's seeming indifference, the seeming donor fatigue and inherent corruption.

Key setbacks included the weak professional base of most of its staff,

including the senior cadre and internal rivalries, which the DG said was due to a number of staff members who were resistant to change. These often led to infighting among them, thereby dampening staff motivation, relations and outputs.

Other setbacks were the lack of government subvention to the corporation that will underwrite operational cost, which resulted in struggling at some point to pay staff salaries on time and sustain its satellite link-up, an essential component of any modern day broadcast media entity that desires to compete favourably with others in this digital era.

There was also the lack of adequate logistic support, compounded by an erratic power supply, in addition to post-2012-election questions about credibility.

These often led to compromises in operations, including violation of the Act and the constant review and disruptions – sometimes cancellations – of planned development programmes and activities.

Besides, there was also inadequate programme planning and a seeming unpreparedness of the institution to go digital in line with the International Telecommunications Union, an issue which Government has not been able to address.

Regional stations lacked adequate facilities, because most of the essential equipment were either outdated, worn out, or faulty. They were therefore hugely dependent on headquarters for programmes as well as for their core operations and sustenance. In fact, those in Pujehun and Kabala essentially remained relay stations, while others were not fully functional.

The Corporation also had to deal with the attendant consequences of failing to honour a number of its indebtedness to suppliers for goods and services delivered or rendered to it in time.

Corruption, due to weak control and

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## Gender Representation within the Media

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Assessing women's representation in management positions in the five daily newspapers investigated, only two of these outlets had women in management positions. These are *Awareness Times*, which has two and *Awoko*, which has one. Currently, there is no female news editor in the entire country. There are only two female proprietors of print media outlets – *Awareness Times* and *Sierra Eye* magazine.

The electronic media seem to be making greater strides in this area as at least five radio stations: *Radio Democracy*, *Star Radio*, *AYV Radio*, *Culture Radio* and *Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation* in Kailahun can boast of women in top management positions: Only one female journalist sits as Commissioner on the Board of the media regulatory body in Sierra Leone – the Independent Media Commission (IMC).

In the area of aspiring for political positions within SLAJ, women's participation has been recognised at

all levels. Nevertheless, their representation in the executive is still low; out of the seven-man executive, only two are women.

On the whole, there is no gainsaying the fact that the global progress that has been made in women's participation in journalism has been remarkable. However, it does not seem to have had a commensurate level of impact on the way women are generally represented within the media.

Since the 1930s when media was introduced in Sierra Leone, women's representation within the media has only slightly improved. The rate of improvement has been very slow as a consequence of a whole lot of issues, including those discussed in this piece. Since women are now aware that ownership and control of the media in Sierra Leone are dominated by men, female journalists have to candidly assess the way forward in terms of their challenges. They need to adopt a more vibrant approach in dealing with their issues. Rather than accepting the domination of certain fields of reporting by their male counterparts,

they need to empower themselves with tertiary education and the requisite capacity to become more relevant in those fields. Gender discrimination in the newsroom has not been given a loud enough voice in Sierra Leone. In the past SLAJ has not been sufficiently engaged in dealing with issues regarding the low representation and participation of women in the media. This suggests a worrying show of acceptance of the status quo by those who should be voicing their dissatisfaction.

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## SLBC and its Public Service Mandate

*From P 7*

management systems, accentuated by financial leakages, also contributed immensely towards putting the institution at a disadvantage – an unfortunate situation that was confirmed by the auditing firm, Vivian Bell and Associates, the first audit of the Corporation (2011-2012).

Management has also not been able to account for all its assets to date.

These prevailing circumstances pressured the institution to put premium on advertising revenue, especially in the absence of a regular source of funding for operations.

The situation, though dismal, is not intractable, because there are a number of options still available to SLBC, particularly in the areas of staff capacity building, institutional strengthening, technological advancement and attitudinal change.

There is therefore urgent need for Government to subvent SLBC in order to augment operational costs, or preferably replace advertising; and also to provide the necessary resources for it to migrate to digital transmission, increase transmission channels and standardise operating studios and equipment.

There is also the need for harmonising the institution, reducing operational costs, the introduction of strong financial control measures and downsizing of staff – which the government has been accused of blocking.

The Act also needs to be reviewed to remove advertising permit and include the Mass Communication Department on the Board of Trustees and probably remove the so called 'Civil Society Sierra Leone' Representative.

Until these issues are dealt with, the corporation will remain unstable; switching between a public service and state broadcaster under normal circumstances, and operating as a partisan state broadcaster at critical times, such as during national election campaigns, with all their attendant consequences. These include loss of credibility and public trust.

It will also remain highly dependent on advertising returns, limited sponsorships and public support, and Government 'bailouts' in the case of eventualities.

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# Community Radio performance in Sierra Leone - 2014

*This article examines the community radio broadcasting sector in Sierra Leone in 2014 in terms of its mission, which is primarily to give voice to the vast majority of people in rural areas who cannot access mainstream and social media. The central focus is: If and how community media have performed in terms of meeting the expectations of providing access to information and creating a platform for marginalised voices.*

**By Francis Sowa**

Community radio broadcasting started in Sierra Leone a little over twenty years ago. The first community radio station, known as 'Radio Makneh', set up by the Wesleyan Mission, started broadcasting in 1994. Since then, community radio stations have been established in almost all districts in the country. Their history is relatively short compared to what is now the country's public service radio, the *Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC)*, which started as the Redifussion Relay Service (RRS) on 7th May 1934 and was later inaugurated as the *Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS)* in October 1955 (Cole, 1995, Holmes 1998). Although they have made enormous gains in their operations, they have also faced numerous challenges.

The UNESCO's Media Development Indicators (MDIs) on community media dealing with issues like, whether mechanisms such as public hearings for communities to give their mandate to a community broadcaster and to renew that mandate at regular intervals exist, community-based mechanisms for evaluating community media exist, the State takes positive measures to support community broadcast media, and CSOs assist community broadcast media, were utilised in examining the performance of community media.

Currently, Sierra Leone has over thirty community radio stations registered with the country's media regulatory body, the Independent Media Commission (IMC). Community radios are present in 13 of the 14 political districts in Sierra

Leone. Bo district is the only one without a community radio station. Community radios generally broadcast content that is quite popular to a local audience, but which may often be overlooked by commercial or mass-media broadcasters. The IMC Media Code of Practice defines a community radio as: "One, which is for, by and about the community, whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursues social development agenda and which is not for profit."

A community radio is one of the components within the broader context of the term, community media. The phrase "community media" encompasses a range of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge, or change the operating principles, structures, financing, and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media" (Tacchi, Slater, & Lewis, 2003 cited in Howley K. 2010).

Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, community radio stations are an important part of the media landscape. "They make up one of a three-tier system of radio, the other parts being public service and commercial radio. They were set up to provide a platform for communities to communicate between themselves and with their governments without interference" (The Healthy Community Radio Station, 2013).

Managers of five community radio stations in all the regions were interviewed about their performance



in 2014. All of them highlighted their coverage of Ebola and its related issues as the key activity undertaken during the year under review.

Apart from Ebola issues, Hassan Yamba Koroma, Station Manager, *Radio Gbafth (FM 91)* in Mile 91, Tonkolili District, said they were also involved in the promotion of girl-child education, promotion of commercial agricultural activities, local governance and justice, security and gender Issues.

Ahmed Kallon, General Manager of *Eastern Radio*, Kenema, said they embarked on capacity building of staff and volunteers in 2014, while Edward Sesay, Station Manager, *Voice of the Peninsular (Radio Tombo)*, revealed that they embarked on fund-raising shows and an inter-village football gala competition to sustain the radio station.

According to Foday Sulaiman Dumbuya, Station Manager, Radio Kolenten, they requested the Kambia community to purchase a transmitter costing \$5,000, which the community did, and they also embarked on cross-border radio programmes into Guinea following requests from Guineans.

The lack of funds to retain trained staff members and to sustain the operations of the station, insufficient equipment, limited resources for field and production activities and the low level of women's participation on radio programmes, were highlighted as the major challenges encountered in 2014 by almost all the community radio stations. General Manager, Kallon added that, "Eastern Radio, Kono was attacked by youths who damaged furniture, an air-conditioner and the main door to the station.

The incident occurred following an

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## The Media's Response to Ebola in Sierra Leone



*SLAJ President Kelvin Lewis & NERC CEO Rtd. Maj. Palo Conteh during the launch of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign*

### **From P 8**

public service broadcaster, *Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation Television (SLBC TV)*.

In order to respond to the outbreak, the station modified its programming and created new programmes specific to the EVD and also incorporated EVD issues in existing programmes. Popular programmes like the news magazine programme “*Wey Yus*” carried reports related to EVD in almost every edition of the programme.

### **From Adversarial Journalism to Advocacy**

Traditionally, journalism in Sierra Leone, in relation to government activities, is generally adversarial and seeks to expose failures and wrongdoing. This makes government officials very wary of journalists and journalists generally suspicious of them. During the EVD outbreak, however, there was a conscious effort on the part of journalists to change their approach from one which seeks to expose the failings of government and its officials, to more of advocacy.

This shift was instigated by the SLAJ Ebola Response Committee which saw a need to focus the media's work on not only providing information or generally reporting what was

happening, but also advocating change of behaviour. It was believed that those behaviours that were militating against the reduction and eventual halt of the spread of the disease had to be changed and the media could play a major role in advocating for this change of behaviour. Exposing the failings in the national Ebola response at the time the outbreak was at its peak would have diverted attention and reinforced negative perceptions, thus making it more difficult for the desired behaviour change to be achieved.

This approach resulted in a significant reduction in publications that were critical of the Ebola response, thus providing space for education and sensitization of the public on EVD and the actions individuals and communities needed to take to bring the outbreak to an end. This approach is no doubt debatable on the basis of the traditional role of the media. However, it is believed that it contributed significantly to the generally united front with which the public confronted the disease in Sierra Leone.

### **The Yellow Ribbon Campaign**

The activity that best illustrates the shift from adversarial journalism to advocacy, is the yellow ribbon campaign designed and implemented by SLAJ that was launched in

February 2015.

This was a campaign that was deployed through print, electronic and social media and drew on the unique strength of SLAJ whose membership is spread across the country.

The yellow ribbon was used as a symbol of commitment of individuals, groups, institutions and communities to take action in four specific areas in order to achieve zero Ebola infection rate in the shortest possible time. These were presented as the following action points:

- Bury all dead bodies safely
- Keep sick people away from others
- Speak out if you know of a sick person
- “Contacts” must stay in one area with food and water

The media was used as the primary vehicle to drive the campaign and to seek the required commitment.

Individuals were encouraged to wear the yellow ribbon as a sign of their commitment to the action points and SLAJ provided yellow wrist bands that became quite popular.

### **Why Yellow?**

Being the lightest hue of the colour spectrum, the colour psychology of yellow is uplifting and illuminating, offering hope, happiness, cheerfulness and fun. Yellow is creative from a mental aspect, the colour of new ideas, helping us to find new ways of doing things.

Yellow is the colour of the sun. It is the first colour you see if you watch the rising sun. It therefore signifies a new dawn, the birth of a new day, the hope of things to come. Above all, yellow is the easiest colour to see and therefore the most attention grabbing of all the colours.

SLAJ believed the symbolism of yellow was most appropriate for the campaign because by February 2015,

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# The Silent Voice of Ethics in the Sierra Leone Media

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defend their own, regardless of the circumstances. Not surprisingly, during National Election campaigns, ethics are all but discarded as journalists descend into propaganda journalism, character assassination and mudslinging in an effort to promote their publications' agenda. Reporters are often faced with the choice of either conforming to the status quo of their newspaper or seeking employment elsewhere.

The lead up to the 2012 National Presidential Elections saw the publication of such articles as, "SLPP Presidential Aspirant is a Drug Dealer" in *The Senator* of 26th July, 2011. The *Sierra Express Media* published a cartoon on 1st August, 2011 that depicted the First Lady giving money to one Florence Kattah in return for political support. This newspaper made no attempt whatsoever to provide a factual basis for such a serious accusation. In an adjoining article titled: "Stop the Talking You Big Fat Hog", the said Florence Kattah is referred to as a "big fat hog". The 2012 elections were largely a race between the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). As such, many newspapers were quick to make their associations known and the mud began to fly. The smear campaign launched by *Awareness Times* against the SLPP candidate, Julius Maada Bio, was an indelible feature of the media atmosphere. In their support of the rival parties, the refusal by these two papers to provide balance in their respective articles was an indication that their main intent was to attack their opponents, regardless of what the truth was.

At journalistic fora, journalists have often complained about unfavourable working conditions that cause the low level reporting, which every so often crosses ethical boundaries. The fact

that most newspaper houses are unable to provide high financial incentives for their reporters means that invariably the need to meet financial goals supersedes the crucial need for journalistic integrity. The so-called 'brown envelope' journalism, which refers to the writing of news articles to favour or disfavour an individual or entity in return for a cash reward, is a very real, if unfortunate, phenomenon. Such articles almost always compromise fundamental journalistic principles of accuracy and balance. Despite the enactment of the Freedom of Information Law in 2013, bureaucratic red tape in government and corporate entities continues to hamper journalists in their search for

***A tour of media institutions conducted by the IMC in 2012 revealed that the majority of them had no conclusive house rules or codes for ethical conduct. That is not to suggest, however, that all of them routinely fall foul of ethical issues***

information. Consequently, journalists who are unable to afford the wherewithal to go in search of added information to provide a balanced story will publish whatever is easily accessible. As such, they end up misinforming their readers or providing insufficient data.

Whether ethical standards are mired down by a harsh environment or deliberately sidestepped for personal gain, IMC is charged with the responsibility of monitoring media activity in Sierra Leone and enforcing penalties on offenders. Section 1b of the revised Media Code of Practice titled: "Code of Practice Governing the Print Media", deals specifically with infringements that cross ethical boundaries. It carries penalties of fines ranging from one million leones to twenty million leones for such infringements as harassment, character assassination, indecency or

inaccuracy, among other things. In spite of these powers at its disposal, the IMC has been harshly criticized in the media, accused of being 'inept' (*Awareness Times*, 21st February, 2011) 'toothless' and 'somewhat biased' (*The Senator*, 2011).

As members of society, journalists have a finger on the pulse of the public's expectations regarding media coverage. The slew of sensationalized headlines that are rarely supported by thoroughly researched content reflects a flawed interpretation of society's expectations. Values of truth, decency and modesty are deeply rooted in local culture and religion, yet it is not often that members of society publically criticize media content that lacks these

qualities. Radio talk shows have presented platforms for the public to comment on media coverage of certain issues via phone-in, but any effect this has had on the quality of media content is minimal, at best. Discussions on media ethics specifically, are virtually non-existent.

Individuals and entities frequently bring matters of libel and defamation before the IMC Complaints Committee but society, in general, has not taken a stance against unethical behaviour in the media. In 1999 the publication of semi naked pictures of Sophie Rhys-Jones, the fiancée of Prince Edward in *The Sun* newspaper of Britain, resulted in a campaign against tabloid newspapers. Opinion polls showed that three out of four newspaper readers favored laws to curb the deliberate entrapment of people by reporters (*The Christian Science Monitor* June 1, 1999). Ultimately *The Sun* was forced to make a rare apology. The Sierra Leonean society is yet to present a unified front against unacceptable media behavior.

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## The Silent Voice of Ethics in the Sierra Leone Media

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It is uncertain whether this is due to the fact that society is insensitive to the issue or simply because it accepts it as the general local standard.

A tour of media institutions conducted by the IMC in 2012 revealed that the majority of them had no conclusive house rules or codes for ethical conduct. That is not to suggest, however, that all of them routinely fall foul of ethical issues. Newspapers such as *Politico*, *Awoko*, *Concord Times* and *Premier News* have largely been able to stay out of the IMC Complaints Committee radar. While they may not all have written-down house rules, these papers and a few others exercise a level of self-regulation regardless of prevailing circumstances. In them, professionalism is prioritized over the need for commercial gain and, whether as a consequence of this or not, some of them are among the top selling newspapers in the country.

The electronic media has generally adhered to ethical standards despite one or two scattered incidents, one of which involved the closure of two politically-owned radio stations for incitement. The Sierra Leone Association of Journalists is, nonetheless, working on taking on a more

regulatory role for all its members.

Raising ethical standards in the Sierra Leone media is not a complex issue. Whether ethical breaches are a result of ignorance or deliberate self-seeking, unless the provisions in the IMC Code of Practice and Act are stringently observed, the trend is bound to continue. Also, media literacy needs to be integrated into society so that consumers see it as their civic responsibility to more forcefully raise objections about unethical media activities.

*Brian James is a Writer and journalist. His publications include short stories in various anthologies; On the Road to Godiva (Book of Voices, 2005), Devils at the Door (Dreams, Miracles and Jazz, 2008), Simple Economics (Caine Prize for African Writing – Work In Progress, 2009) and The Dark Man (The Price and other Stories, 2013). He holds a First Class B.A Honours degree in Mass Communication from the Fourah Bay College University of Sierra Leone.*

*He is currently the consultant editor at Sierra Eye magazine. He lives in Freetown with his wife Williette and three children.*

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## Government, the Media and Control

“We can criticize government on many fronts for their seeming unwillingness to effect a positive and enabling environment for media development, but the bulk of the responsibility rests with media practitioners.”

“Our media scene,” he maintains, “is characterized more by our unprofessional approaches in practice, our non-objective and partisan commentary and sadly, among some, our lack of integrity.”

Media professionals across the board, Warritay says, should demand excellence in their delivery, remain steadfast in searching for the truth, stay above reproach in their dealings with all and unyielding to Government and

citizenry pressures.

“When we start walking this road, people will take us seriously,” he notes.

*Ahmed Sahid Nasralla (popularly known by his alias De Monk) is an award winning journalist and cartoonist with up to 15 years experience working in the Sierra Leone print media. He is popular for his satirical column, Teacher Lemp Lemp, which is a product of his creative writing skills and artistic talent.*

# An Outsider's View Of The Media In Sierra Leone

By Winstanley R. Bankole Johnson

## Thematic Streams

Journalism as a vocation or profession has existed from time immemorial, but it wasn't until May of 2011 at the graduation ceremonies of my last daughter, Cheryl Olatokunbo with a first degree in Print Journalism from the Virginia Commonwealth University, that I became aware of the various thematic streams of Journalism. These include: Public Relations; Broadcast Journalism; Creative Advertising; Print Journalism and Strategic Advertising. Advanced Certificates are also obtainable at Masters Level in "Strategic Public Relations" and "Multi-Media Journalism".

## Specialization

The primary objectives of the media generally being to "inform, educate and entertain", advanced countries have, over time, further broadened those thematic streams to foster specialization, enhance professionalism and the technical savvy of the practitioners, in the same way other professions have re-engineered their disciplines to achieve greater specialization amongst their cadres, sustain their relevance and also mitigate unethical tendencies likely to bring their memberships into disrepute. Thus, in Medicine and Law for example, opportunities exist for the practitioners to become specialized to better capacitate them for quality service delivery to patients and clients alike.

One cannot say with any degree of certainty whether those same opportunities for specialization exist for our media practitioners beyond the award of their "general" or "honours" certificates in Mass Communication from the University, but practical evidences would seem to suggest the contrary, insofar as "informing, educating and entertaining" the public

are concerned, leaving one to conclude that there is much room for improvement. I shall treat each segment briefly on its merit.

## THE PRINT MEDIA

In this segment, sensationalism is the order of the day, with the bodyline or narrative reflecting a total disconnect from screaming headlines. Syntax is lost ubiquitously in reportages, leaving the reading public unprofessionally short-changed in value.

Objectivity is often subsumed by insinuations of practitioners deliberately slanting opinions in favour of counter-parties; aspersions become couched in specious attempts to intimidate innocent and peaceful citizens unable or reluctant to seek legal redress for defamation of character..

What the readership is interested in is information, education and entertainment updates – not diatribes and mudslinging between and amongst giant protagonists. But what they invariably become exposed to are press wars, waged either directly between editorial giants or as political proxies, for contract fees.

## THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The demerits of the print media are also akin to the electronic media, except that in the latter case it is much easier to discern fickle-minded moderators. Their choice of questions are either extremely watered-down or posed in a leading way, even as interventions of panelist or callers with dissenting views are interrupted or have their calls distorted, all of which do not reflect professionalism or a desire to grow. Thankfully, unlike the print media where one is stuck with newspapers purchased, a listener to an electronic airwave is always spoilt for choice and can exercise that right as it pleases him or her by switching to alternative frequencies.



## Coverage

It has to be agreed though that one notable difference between the two is that in recent years, the area of coverage by the electronic media has grown exponentially, courtesy of the Media Reform Co-ordinating Group Sierra Leone (MRCG-SL) and their local and international partners. The print media dissemination and circulation would seem not to have grown beyond the same bounds that existed since the eighties volume-wise per capita population in the major provincial towns and cities, as is commensurate with the population growth in those areas.

## Powers

As Jeffrey Blant, former senior Director of the NBC News once said, "Anyone who communicates for a living has enormous powers". That aptly describes how impactful the media can be depending, of course, on the skill and articulating prowess of the practitioner. It is sad to note however that that dictum is rarely harnessed by local media practitioners, of course to their social detriment.

Accepted, new recruitment vistas have complimented the exponential outturn of practitioners, so we now have Communications Officers attached to MDAs, including our Foreign Missions and major multi-national institutions mindful of their corporate image. But, more in the case of our MDAs, objectivity becomes subsumed apparently for political or pecuniary gains, or outright mercenary intentions.

## Hazards

One cannot discuss the media in Sierra Leone without making reference to some of the occupational hazards – perceived or actual – to which media practitioners become occasionally exposed,

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## An Outsider's View Of The Media In Sierra Leone

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and which, to some extent, can be said to constitute some of the factors inhibiting their performance. True the Public Order Act of 1965 might be having some severe restrictions on their overall output, but given the number and frequency of enforced or voluntary retractions and apologies published by offending Editors emanating from various genuine complainants, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that 60% of risks media practitioners become exposed to are self-inflicted.

### Vanilla Practitioners

My respectful submission is that with a little bit more research, investigative analysis and objectivity, those risks could be diminished or even avoided once local media practitioners are able to distinguish between personal opinions and facts. And that is where “Vanilla Practitioners”, that is, those lacking in specialization, irrespective of their years in the trade, fall prey. The need for specialization therefore cannot be overemphasized. And that is the difference between the media here and that in the civilized world, where correspondents and reporters manifest such exceptional skills in specific areas such as the Theatre and Arts, Music, Law, Medicine, Aviation; Education, the Sciences, Horticulture, Sports (not as in the plagiaristic “cut and paste” manner evident in our newspapers, but as would evince the reporters' initiatives), that they rarely fall off the legal plank through the practice of “yellow” journalism. The greatest beneficiaries are the readership and listeners who become adequately informed, educated, entertained and left feeling refreshed in the process. That is path the media in Sierra Leone must begin to tread.

*Winstanley Rutherford Bankole Johnson is a retired International Banker (Standard Chartered), former Mayor of the Municipality of Freetown Former Chairman, Sierra Leone Commercial Bank, former Chairman Sierra Leone Road Maintenance Fund President, Anglican (Freetown) Diocesan Lay Readers' Association, Chairman Planned Parenthood Association (Western Area) Volunteers, Life Patron for several Civic organizations. He is married with several children.*

## The Media's Response to Ebola in Sierra Leone

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the country was at a point in the fight against the EVD where there was hope of bringing it to an end.

The campaign sought to, while committing individuals, groups, institutions and communities to taking the action required to achieve zero new infections, also celebrate those frontline workers that had paid with their lives, those who continued putting their lives at risk and those citizens that had survived being infected with the virus.

### Impact

The Initiative was seen as a good way to re-energise social mobilisation activities to bring an end to the EVD outbreak in the country and was supported by a number of UN agencies. Eventually it was adopted as a means of galvanising women to take the lead in the struggle to achieve and maintain zero infection rate for the required 42 days for the country to be declared Ebola free.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be stated that without the media in Sierra Leone, it would have been impossible to end the EVD outbreak in the country. Apart from the fact that the agencies working on social mobilisation against the EVD made extensive use of the media to be able to reach a mass audience, the interventions of SLAJ played a major role not only in providing accurate and timely information to the public about the disease, but also in building a sense of unity of purpose at community and national level.

At the time of writing this article, Sierra Leone had not yet been declared Ebola free, but was well on the way to seeing this happen and there is no doubt that the media as a whole made a significant contribution to making this happen.

*Dr. Julius Spencer is Chairman SLAJ Ebola Response Committee and Managing Director of Premier Media Group Limited which owns Premier News newspaper.*

## Community Radio Performance in Sierra Leone - 2014

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announcement made by the police on the radio that the young people of the town, should discontinue a protest that ensued after they "refused" to allow workers of the Ebola Response Centre in Kono to collect an elderly woman that was suspected of showing signs of Ebola. Soldiers put the situation under control."

On whether public hearings were organised for communities to give their mandate in terms of how the stations should operate, Samba Koroma, Station Manager, *Radio Bontico*, said, "One such meeting was held in 2014 to know the programmes the community liked and new programmes they wanted to be introduced." *Radio Gbafth* also held such hearings before 2014 at their end of year festival.

*Eastern Radio* did not hold such hearings, "but we do host their representatives and we report to them on our economic status while we rely on Civil Society and the representatives of the various interest groups on the Board to articulate and present the interests of those groups for onward implementation by management."

However, all the stations reported that the mandate given by the community was renewed at regular intervals. Most of them also made reference to the renewal of the Board's mandate. *Eastern Radio* does theirs at "biannual General Assembly meetings" while *Radio Kolenten's* renewal is done, "...once every two years at quarterly radio update programmes in which we solicit public views on issues of concern." *Voice of the Peninsular* "organised one public hearing in November 2013." None of the community radio stations received support in the form of subvention from Government.

Do CSOs assist the community radio stations through capacity building, seed funding, emergency bridging finance, or advocacy? Three of the stations said no to these questions. *Eastern Radio* also stated: "We have



Journalists from various radio stations under IRN contribute to the regular Ebola updates

been able to prevail on community farmers to cultivate for the radio to establish a seed bank. About 50 communities in five chiefdoms cooperated in the farming project."

Only *Radio Kolenten* said it got capacity building and financial support from Action Aid, CAWeC, ABC-Development, FAWE/CIC UK and Paramount Chiefs in various areas.

In order to get an external perspective on the performance of community radio stations and the major governance issues in 2014, the heads of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) were interviewed. The Chairman of SLAJ, Eastern Region, Bob Saffa, said the major issue in the Region had to do with *Starline Radio*, which broadcast stories about some Members of Parliament from Kenema district which the latter considered demeaning to their status. The Station Manager was invited to parliament for questioning and one hearing had been held on the matter so far. Aside from that, he said, all the community radio stations provided information on Ebola issues particularly at the onset of the outbreak of the virus in the region. He said the community radios encouraged people to ask questions and to seek clarifications about the spread and control of the disease in the early days of the outbreak.

The Acting Chairman of SLAJ,

Northern Region, Foday Sulaiman Dumbuya, said there were two major governance challenges on community broadcasting in the region. He said *Radio Numbara* in Tonkolili "had problems with an action of the Board regarding the sacking of the Station manager, Alfred Koroma, who was later reinstated." He said *Radio Cart-Bamin* in Madina, Tonko Limba, Kambia, also "had problems with the governance structure of the radio, but SLAJ North is trying to address the matter."

The Chairman of SLAJ, Northern Region, Sammy Haffner, said the stations in the region were operational though they faced many technical problems. No major problems with the operations of community radios in the region were reported.

Commenting on the activities of community radio stations, the National Coordinator of the Independent Radio Network (IRN), Ransford Wright, said in terms of performance, the major coverage of the second half of 2014 was on the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). "The community radios provided the local coverage on Ebola before the Independent Radio Network (IRN) and the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), started the syndicated national programme on Ebola," he said.

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## Community Radio Performance in Sierra Leone - 2014



The strength of community radios, he added, is that they provide local information; however, they are usually unable to address national issues affecting them locally owing to the lack of the required personnel, research and production skills.

The IRN Coordinator expressed satisfaction that the overall performance of the community radios was gradually improving in the area of broadcasting that is, "being on air". "There is still room for improvement in the area of production and availability of trained personnel. As soon as members of staff at community radio stations are trained, they leave the stations for better jobs," the National Coordinator observed.

In spite of the difficulties they face, Ransford Wright is of the view that "Community radios are able to provide the platform to address community issues."

In the area of technical support, community radios suffered a major blow in 2014 when Gassimu Kelfala, commonly known as 'Gaspi', a broadcast technician, died in a road accident along the Bo Highway. Until his death, 'Gaspi' was a roving technician who helped repair transmitters and other equipment in community radios across the country.

The stories narrated above are symptomatic of what obtains in community radios around the country. However, from a holistic perspective, almost all the community radios performed their expected task of providing news and information to their respective communities.

In the process of performing their main function of providing a platform for local

communities, some of the stations were, on several occasions, 'off air', invariably because of lack of power supply and/or malfunctioning generators. Technical problems range from transmitters malfunctioning, computers crashing, to mixing console and microphones, simply failing to function properly.

All the stations suffer from inadequate financial and technical support, a high turnover of trained and experienced production staff and a dearth of qualified broadcast engineers and technicians. In addition, appropriate accountability and transparency mechanisms in most community radios are still a major challenge. They also have a long way to go in honing finance and marketing skills.

With specific reference to the Healthy Community Radio Station, 2013, the paper suggests the following as the way forward for effective and efficient operation of community radios in Sierra Leone.

"A critical look at the 'Mission and Governance' of the stations (the stations should have a comprehensive constitution that guides their operations, and a clearly expressed mission of community service, etc.)

"Proper 'Management and Staff' (each station should have a long term development strategy with objectives, measurable goals and

strategies to achieve its goals, an organisational structure with clear responsibilities and managers having the necessary skills.)

"Adequate 'Infrastructure and Finance (there is a budget, finance policy and procedures that guide their financial conduct; the station's transmission facilities deliver a clear signal to the target audiences, financial records are maintained, and there are regular financial reports and an annual audit.)

" Programming (they are generally of good technical quality; stations have editorial policies which are adhered to, and a news team with enough skills to gather local news, etc.)

"Community involvement (communities participating in AGMs of the station, a system in place to allow communities to give feedback to the station on programmes and the existence of listeners associations or similar entities, etc.).

According to Healthy Community Radio Station, 2013: "Wealthy sectors of the society have many media choices but community stations often represent the only space where poorer communities can discuss the issues that affect them." In other words, the guiding philosophy of community radios in Sierra Leone should be access and participation - these are crucial to their operations and assessment.

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