

The Effect of 'Soli' on News Reportage in Ghana

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ABSTRACT: *Lately, Ghanaian journalists have been criticised for making 'soli', a synonym for 'brown envelope' in Ghanaian parlance, the norm rather than the exception. This practice is gradually killing the confidence Ghanaian media consumers have in journalists. Furthermore, distrust, scepticism, and uncertainty have dominated the public sphere regarding news reportage. The study examined journalists, event organisers and public relations practitioners' perception on 'soli' and how it affects news reportage. It surveyed randomly selected journalists, and interviewed event organisers and public relations practitioners. It became evident that in Ghana 'soli' is a moral problem rather than an ethical one. The paper concluded that 'soli' when accepted, elicit favourable reportage and makes stories advertorial news rather than a fact-based news.*

KEYWORDS: *soli, reportage, journalism, Ghana, brown envelope*

I. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the phenomenon of 'brown envelope journalism' is not a secret to most journalists. This is buttressed by the fact that the phenomenon has so many names by which it is referred to especially on the African continent [9]. However, one is tempted to believe that 'soli' [5], [8] does not exist in the practice of journalism in Ghana; considering the strides and improvement Ghanaian journalists have recorded in helping to uncover alleged corruption and wrongdoing in Ghana.

Journalists under normal circumstance are to gather news or cover programmes for their media houses without being remunerated by their sources. Nonetheless some journalist in Ghana expect their sources to pay or reward them after gathering news or covering a programme especially when they were invited by the organiser(s) of the programme. These payments or rewards are called 'Soli' among Ghanaian journalists [9], [8], [12]. It is also known as 'tips', 'nokofio', and 'T&T'. Soli is mostly in cash and sometimes in kind [8]. Journalists justify these payments or rewards by

saying it caters for their transportation to the place and other expenses incurred in the process of gathering the news or covering the programme.

Soli though unethical and unprofessional [12], seems to have become an acceptable practice among Ghanaian journalists; so much so that some journalists sometimes heckle event organisers for it if they fail or refuse to give them. Some Ghanaian journalists believe taking soli is their right. Hence the refusal to give affects the reportage.

Africanus Diedong is of the view that "It is difficult for those journalists who accept such "gifts" to say that they have not been bribed. Having received such "gifts", how can they write a fair, balanced, truthful, and comprehensive report about a controversial happening in which the organizers of the event may have some serious questions to answer?" [5]. Either the journalist writes scanty stories or they do not write at all in the worse case. Birhanu also hold the view that Ethiopian journalism is devoid of competence, creativity, courage and fault-finding journalists. He further explained that bribery in journalism "is the collapse of independent, accurate, objective and informative journalism" [4]. Lodamo and Skjerdal also share a similar view; it spoils journalistic independence and damages public confidence in the media [9]. Commenting on the phenomenon of bribery in journalism called 'Gombo' in Cameroon, Ndangam explained that "individual and collective notions of personhood, self-enhancement and self-enrichment can override professional commitment and obligation to the journalism profession in particular, and society in general"[11].

The issue of soli (Freebies) or 'brown envelopes' is a common problem among journalists in most African countries and Ghana is no exception. This paper seeks to look at the effect of soli on news reportage in Ghana. Whether it affects the quality of reportage and publication.

The objective of the paper is to find out the effect of soli on news reporting and publication in Ghana. It specifically sought to find out why journalists took soli. It also attempted to find out why event organisers and public relations (PR) practitioners gave soli. Lastly, the paper sought to find out whether the practice is having a positive or negative effect on news reporting in Ghana. The paper discusses various reasons both ethical and professional for the practice in Ghana and how it affects news reportage.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research was done using questionnaires, and qualitative interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected media men across the country including reporters, stringers, editors, and assistant editors from print, electronic and new media; both private and state owned. A total of one hundred and fifty-two (152) questionnaires were sent out in both hard and soft copy between December 2014 and March 2015. Ninety-two (92) responded to the questionnaire. Fourteen questions were asked in the questionnaire. Public relations practitioners and event organisers from academic institutions, financial institutions, manufacturing industries, mining companies, metropolitan and district assemblies were interviewed. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, through the telephone and the Internet (Skype, Google Hangout and Viber).

III. ORIGIN OF SOLI

According to Derek Forbes (2005), the term supposedly originated in the UK in the 1990s. Brown envelopes were a key ingredient in the so called "cash-for-questions affair", in which lobbyists allegedly paid two members of the British parliament on behalf of the influential businessman Mohamed Al-Fayed to post specific questions on the agenda for the House of Commons [3]. *The Guardian*, which exposed the affair in October 1994, reported that the cash was handed over in brown envelopes, hence the rationale for the term. "Brown envelopes" later came to be adopted as a term designating the equivalent handover of cash from sources to journalists, according to Forbes (2005, p. 82)

"Brown envelopes" was a euphemism which originated from the practice among Ghanaians to discreetly enclose bribe money in envelopes, not necessarily brown ones, rather than exposing it [2] Soli' is derived from 'solidarity' "denoting that the source has some sort of sympathy with

the despairing situation of the journalist and therefore wants to extend a helping hand which can also strengthen the ties between the two parties" [3]. "Payola' is commonly used, especially in the context where payments are forwarded to journalists and media operators for airplay of popular music" [7]. "Ghana has introduced an exclusive phrase to describe refreshments and other freebies offered at the end of an official events, namely 'item 13' " [8]. The term item 13 is used to denote the last item or activity on a list of agenda for the meeting.

IV. WHY SOLI

Under the normal circumstance, journalists are to gather news or cover programmes for their stations or press houses without being paid by their sources. Nonetheless some journalist in Ghana expects their sources to pay or reward them after gathering news or covering a programme especially when they were invited by the organiser(s) of the programme. There are some reasons why journalists, reporters and media operators take soli, payola or item 13 and why Public Relations practitioners and organisers also give it. .

Poor remuneration of media men, is one major reason why these media men take soli [12], [6], [13]. In Ghana, the act of gathering and disseminating news has turned into big time business instead of service to the people. As a result, some owners of some media houses in their quest to maximise their profits employ less qualified reporters; mostly senior high school leavers who have just gone to some way side journalism school for three months and call themselves journalists or those who have not been trained at all, and pay them meagre salaries with no allowances. These reporters have to survive and some have families to take care off [11]. So they are tempted or take soli to supplement their meagre salaries.

Moreover, the media industry is not well regulated. Although there is the National Media Commission (NMC) to see to it that the right things are done and that the media industry is well regulated; it seems the National Media Commission with all the constitutional backing cannot bit as hard as is expected of it. So the 'rich entrepreneurs' have taken advantage of this and are establishing media houses especially radio stations and exploiting the poor journalists, hence, the need to take soli to survive [13].

Again, because of the proliferation of media

houses especially radio and television stations, some of which are not well resourced (financial and infrastructure)[6] for the media business. So reporters and journalists have to find their own means to locations to gather news or cover programmes [13], [1]. Though some media and press houses reimburse the reporters and journalists most do not. These reporters and journalists take soli to defray some of the cost they incur doing the process. Sometimes without these soli some reporters and journalists will not be able to transport themselves back to their destination.

Further, reporters have prior knowledge that event organisers and public relations practitioners (PR) take money from their companies and institutions to cater for journalists. So, if they know they have been budgeted for then they will find ways to take their share. Hence, reporters lurk around the premises after a programme has ended as if they have other businesses doing. Meanwhile, it is an indirect way of telling the event organiser that they are waiting for their 'soli'. Reporters having prior knowledge that they have been budgeted for will not allow event organisers pocket the money at their expense.

From the Public Relations (PR) practitioners and event organisers' point of view, they gave soli and payola to media men and operators because they want to maximise their tight budget. So they pay soli or payola, then they avoid paying high commercial rates but at the same time be able to publicise their products and services through an array of media. To them this approach proved cheaper and cost effective as the soli or payola served as an unwritten contract between them and the media men [9].

Besides, it is a common practice in Ghana, though not customary, to give gifts such as food, cash, and snacks to family and friends who visit or honour ones invitation to a ceremony especially at traditional marriages (engagements). In line with this, some PR practitioners and event organisers do practice this too. So they gave soli (cash, and 'item 13') to show their appreciation and gratitude to their friends in the media for honouring their invitation and staying to the end [10]. Other times too, they gave soli to show sympathy to the despairing journalists or reporter who might not be able to transport himself or herself back to his or her destination if there is no soli [8].

They also said soli strengthens the ties between

the two individuals and their companies as well [14], [10].

V. THE EFFECT OF SOLI ON NEWS REPORTAGE

Firstly, 'soli' when given to a reporter forces him or her to give positive reportage no matter what happened: as soli serves as "an unwritten contract between the public office and the reporters, whereby positive promotion is expected in return." [11]. When it happens like that even when the reporter is supposed to give a report on the negative side on the event, he or she tones down his or her words, tries as much as possible to avoid sensationalism or speaks very little of the negative part of the event in other not to make it obvious that he or she has taken 'soli'

Secondly, 'soli' kills objectivity in news reports [13], [1]. In that as a reporter takes 'soli' some form of relationship is built between him and the event organiser or PR officer. Hence, he becomes subjective in his writing. Sometimes to the extent that reporters unconsciously express their opinion in the reportage or they are treated as editorials [14]. Thirdly, depending on the amount given a company or an institution can get a two-column quarter page reportage, half page or a full page reportage. There have been instances where some institutions get a feature done on them because of the amount they gave for 'soli'. In the broadcast media, depending on the amount given, the news story will be given less than a minute or more. In some cases too, some companies have received not so favourable reportage because they failed to give 'soli' to some uninvited reporters. In the worst case the reportage did not see the light of day because 'soli' was not given to push the story [6] as some editors and copy editors expected their share of the booty [4]. Lastly, once 'soli' is given the reportage is no longer fact based news. It becomes more like advertorial news: as the reporter tries his best to persuade his audience using apt descriptions, sensationalism, and flowery expressions. Though some writers have argued that 'soli' kills creativity [4], in some other sense, it rather made the reporters creative. In that, the reporter has to choose the appropriate words, couch them and phrase them in order to attract his audience and please his benefactor as well. In view of the above, many media consumers see news reports not to be credible [14]. They see news reportage just as any other advertisement in the media.

VI. DISCUSSION

This paper raised some issues on the phenomenon of soli in the practice of journalism in Ghana. The paper noted that journalists have a lukewarm attitude towards the phenomenon. Nevertheless journalists were quick to add that they are still dedicated to the ideals of truthfulness, objectivity and non-partisan reporting and most indicated that they have never or rarely accepted bribes or soli to misrepresent, to colour news reports, or in the worse case suppress information.

It was evident that all the respondents knew about soli and have accepted some in one form or the other. All the respondents said they never asked for it. However, views were divided on whether journalists felt comfortable when taking 'soli'. While some respondents said they did not feel comfortable, others felt it was rightly due them so felt comfortable taking it. The respondents all agreed that their media outlets do not agree to the practice. Some respondent said they were transported to locations to gather news or cover events, others said they were not transported. Most respondents said the practice should not continue. Again, views were divided on whether soli enhances the profession or not; while some were of the view that 'soli' kills journalistic independence and objectivity others believed that it was a good form of motivation for reporters since their employers do not pay them well and it makes them feel appreciated. On the ultimate question, "Does soli affect your writing?" All the respondents said 'no' but some explained that without it they are not motivated to write, push their editors to publish or they write in a fact-matter manner.

The relationship between event organizers and public relations practitioners and media practitioners is a symbiotic one but more like fair weather friends. It is more like cash for news. Interviews with event organisers and public relations practitioners revealed that not all of them knew about soli. Some said they thought it was the rates they had to pay for their news to be aired or published. Among those who knew about the phenomenon, some did not know that it was unethical. They said since it was common among Ghanaian journalists, they thought it was a legitimate part of the practice. Since journalists when asking for it call it 'T&T'. All the interviewees said they have given out 'T&T' (soli) without compulsion before. Nevertheless,

they stated that after given out 'T&T' they do expect positive press. When asked, "does soli attract journalists?" They responded in the affirmative. Eight of the interviewees said 'even those reporters who were not invited would attend if the organisation is known for giving out 'T&T'. Some PR practitioners working in remote companies revealed that they do state in their invitation letters that 'T&T' will be given, to attract journalists. "Without this statement you might not get any reporter at your event." Nine of the interviewees agreed that they are part of the reason why the phenomenon is flourishing. They however added that journalists are not obliged to take it if they do not want to. They also said they are yet to meet a journalist or reporter who will reject 'T&T'. Those who rejected 'T&T' was because of the amount given looking at their pedigree in the profession but if the amount was increased, they accepted it. "Everyone has a price" some interviewees intimated.

VII. CONCLUSION

By analysing the interviews and questionnaire conducted across the length and breath of Ghana, it is possible to fathom the kind of conditions, environment, media systems and pressures that Ghanaian media practitioners work under.

This paper has argued that soli is a common practice in the journalism profession in Ghana. The paper gave the origin of soli and brought to bear the kind of conditions and media systems media practitioners work within. It also revealed why event organizers and public relations practitioners, the prime players named in the phenomenon, gave out soli. Again, the paper also ascertained how soli whether given or not affected news reportage: elicit favourable story, kills objectivity, the amount of space or air time given to a story and making news reportage an advertorial one.

Looking at the challenges that Ghanaian journalists and reporters face in their daily endeavours in other to bring news to media consumers, any attempt to discouraging or prohibiting the practice, especially when media practitioners are at the mercy of their employers and their 'take home' salaries cannot take them home, will escalate the practice. However, the National Media Commission (NMC) should enforce the standards to the latter. Also, the

Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) should take up a campaign from time to time to dissuade its members from the practice. Furthermore, it is clear from the study and the discussion that event organizers and public relations practitioners will be a vital component in curbing the canker of *solli*.

Given the challenges journalists face in the practice of their profession, *solli* is more of a moral problem than an ethical one. How can a journalist or reporter who cannot transport him or herself back to his or her destination or even feed himself or his family look at 'T&T' (*solli*) and say no; unless he or she has moral principles.

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