

## MEDIA TRANSPARENCY: OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

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### INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine, obviously with a bit of mischief, recently defined public relations as the art of telling the truth with one eye closed and lying with a calculating smile, with both eyes wide open. Similarly, in one of his famous quotes, Mark Twain says that a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. I say these with a light touch but I know that in more ways than one they represent one of the greatest challenges of the public relations profession and the communication industry in general.

We live in a society where things matter most only if they touch us directly. The rest can take a walk and return when we need them. Many governments around the world consider free media a dragon that has to be slain before it matures while some journalists in very influential positions are willing to compromise everything the profession stands for in return for self aggrandizement and personal survival.

I am responding to a presentation made by the IPRA president, Mr. Charles Dan Der Straten Waillet. He raises a number of issues, many of them very disturbing especially for those of us in the media industry. Being a key supplier of news and information to the mainstream media, I believe public relations practitioners have a major stake in the fight against unethical behaviour within the media. It is, therefore, quite gratifying that IPRA and FAPRA have entered the ring and are leading the fight to rout out unethical behaviour among our colleagues who have little regard for the ideals of good journalism.



Having worked in the media industry for many years, and having observed the evolution of the media from the single party era to the current multiparty dispensation, I am convinced that whether in the West or Africa; mainstream media or PR, corrupt practices don't have to be our lot. We don't have to resort to unethical conduct in order to succeed in any profession within the industry.

I must let you know at this point, however, that the Nation Media Group, together with other media companies in Kenya, and training institutions and media NGOs working in the industry have been working together over the years to safeguard the profession from going to the dogs. We realized that state control was not going to be good for us and for our consumers. It has never been. Yet there are some both in the industry and without who are bent on discrediting it through unethical practices. How do you convince the government to keep off your affairs when there are hundreds who do not share the vision for an objective and balanced journalism and who are outright law breakers? You definitely cannot win the argument.

It is against this background that we formed a non-statutory body, the Media Council of Kenya in 2002 to push for self-regulation while maintaining high standards of journalism and resolving conflicts among members. The Council has developed a code of practice for ethical journalism, which has been accepted by all the major stakeholders in the profession, including the government.

It is notable, however, that while many journalists working in Kenya and in East Africa adhere to high ethical standards, some could be bowing to pressure and influence from external sources and securing and using material that has been “paid” for to propagate an agenda known only to its proponents.

Some of the reasons advanced for this kind of practice include:



- i. Inadequate training among practising journalists;
- ii. The culture of bribe-taking and giving, which is well entrenched in Kenya;
- iii. The absence of proper guidance from editorial managers;
- iv. Lack of comprehensive editorial policies in media houses or, where it is present, failure to disseminate its contents to reporters and editors;
- v. Poor remuneration of journalists by their employers; and
- vi. Allurement by interested parties with irresistible gifts.

It is difficult to tell which of the foregoing contributes most especially because few journalists will ever admit they took a bribe. If ever they are caught, even fewer will say why they did it.

The Nation Media Group, the largest multimedia company in East and Central Africa, has been working around all these areas to safeguard the profession and shore up the reputation of the industry both in the region and globally. We do this not just for purposes of the bottom line, but because we care deeply for the people who depend on us as a source of news and information.

At the Nation Media Group we have a tight editorial policy designed to bring out the best from our employees. While we seek to have the policy internalized and respected on its own merit, employees are also made fully aware of the consequences of contravening the laid out regulations.

We never take PR stories or stories obtained from politicians or anybody else for that matter, at face value. Indeed this rule applies to all releases and photographs we receive. Even if it looks like a good piece, it will still be judged purely for its news value and universal standards of balance and objectivity. PR photographs must be vetted by the managing editor in charge before use. We do all this not because we distrust you but strictly for purposes of maintaining editorial quality.

I am, however, of the opinion that “cash for editorial” has little to do with the remuneration policy and more to do with one's own philosophy of life. How else does one explain a case



where a senior journalist, well salaried with attractive allowances, **deciding** on his/her own volition to work for a political party or a politician while still on the service of his employer? It is something that we must work on together to ensure total transparency in our media platforms.

As PR practitioners I must urge you to live up to the profession's code of conduct. I do not believe you have to bribe a journalist to get a good story done. In fact, you should report any journalist who demands a bribe from you to his superiors for immediate and appropriate action.

There is growing concern within the media industry, however, that PR practitioners are overloading newsrooms with publicity stunts while inducing journalists with all manner of gifts. There are even cases where PR professionals subject reporters to undue duress to have their material published. Some have sought to retain the services of individuals legally in the employment of a media house.

I must implore you to strive to do good stories that can pass the editorial test without resorting to “pushing” tactics – after all, you are a major source of news and information. That we recognize. To earn the respect of the media and consumers of information, it is essential that you maintain high standards within your own companies and in your relations with the media.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world”.

