



JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTION OF BROWN ENVELOPE SYNDROME AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Nnanyelugo OKORO, Ph. D.

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

&

Blessing CHINWEOBO-ONUOHA

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

ABSTRACT

This study examined journalists' perception of the brown envelope syndrome and its implication for journalism practice in Nigeria. It surveyed some selected journalists as well as interviewed other journalism practitioners to reach the conclusion that greed is the major cause of the brown envelope syndrome in Nigeria. The paper also noted that this ignoble practice influences journalism practice negatively as some important issues are downplayed while unimportant ones are exaggerated in a bid to satisfy the givers of these brown envelopes. The paper concludes that giving and/or accepting of brown envelopes is corrupt and unprofessional conduct that must be punished and stopped. It therefore recommended that media professional bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the media industry by sanctioning defaulting journalists and by so doing, ensure highest professional conduct of members in all situations.

Key words: Brown envelope syndrome, Ethics, Professionalism, Media, Journalists, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism is a veritable tool for information dissemination, social mobilization and control. It is a means of public education and sensitization on important issues affecting the lives of the people. The vehicle through which journalists fulfil this obligation to the society is the mass media, which comprise radio, television, films, books, sound recordings, newspapers, magazine, and internet, among others. In one way or the other, the society depends on the regular content of the mass media for information, opinion,

entertainment, ideas and a range of other resources. Journalism serves as a mirror in the society, the conciliator, the gatekeeper of issues and events and as such a very important institution in every society.

As watchdogs of the society, journalists are expected to bridge the gap between the government and the society. In all their actions, they are to be accountable to the members of the society. However, in recent times, the brown envelope syndrome seems to be having a crippling effect on journalism practice in Nigeria,

leading to a decline in quality, values and public morality among journalists in Nigeria. At present, it is said that truth, accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity are fast becoming fantasies in Nigerian journalism because of the cankerworm called brown envelope syndrome.

According to Ekerikevwe (2009), brown envelope is common in journalism practice in Nigeria. It is a situation whereby journalists demand for bribe or other forms of gratification before they cover any events or even publish stories from such events. Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012, p. 516) also observe, "It is no longer news that the Brown Envelope Syndrome (BES) has become an albatross for the 21st century Nigerian journalist. It has been criticized by scholars in the field of mass communication who describe it as a form of inducing writers and editors with financial gratification to influence their writings in favour of the givers".

This therefore, means that the Press whose primary responsibility it is to blow the whistle on wrong doings may not be able to do so. Unfortunately, according to Adaba (2010), professional bodies like the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) and others at the helm of affairs that should ordinarily ensure that practitioners adhere strictly to the ethics of their profession, seem to be also involved. The implication is that real news is watered down while

irrelevant issues are overblown because the journalist has been compromised. This also leads to a decline in productivity and professionalism among journalists since they do not honestly and objectively source for news but attend to the highest bidder.

This position is supported by Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012, p. 517) who argue that "these monetary gifts could pressurize the journalist into doing what the giver wants, and this makes the journalist unable to be objective in his reporting of events and issues involving the people who give such gifts. Thus, the news stories produced are likened to commercial products that have been paid for by the customer which should serve the need to which the product is expected, in favour of the customer".

In essence, this paper sought to ascertain journalists' perception of the brown envelope syndrome, areas where it manifests, causes of the brown envelope syndrome, its implication for journalism practice and strategies for controlling the menace among Nigerian journalists. It is expected that knowledge generated can be used to enrich the ethical code of journalism practice in Nigeria.

In highlighting the existence of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism, Skjerdal (2010, p. 370) states that the term 'brown envelope' is applied to denote a corrupt practice which involves transfer of various types of rewards from

sources to journalists who are regarded as custodians of the truth. This, according to him, indicates neglect of ethical requirement of the journalism career as well as undermines the primary role of journalism. Referring to the brown envelope syndrome, Okunna (2003, p. 99) describes brown envelope as a monetary bribe handed out to an unethical journalist to pressurize him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants.

In some Nigerian cities like Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna, Port-Harcourt, Jos, Makurdi and Kano, it is expressed in catchy phrases such as *chope, kua, keske, egunje, partikola, kola, gbemu, golden handshake, communiqua, communiqué, family support, transport, Ghana Must Go, the boys are going, last question, last line* (Oshunkeye, 2011, p. 7). Others terms associated with this are: *Press Release, Appreciation, Welfare, Freebies*, etc. (Nwabueze, 2010, p. 8). In Cameroon, it is known as *Gombo* or *Qua*. South Africa knows it as *Cheque Book* while across many developed countries in the Europe; it is called *Hospitality* (Skjerdal, 2010; Oshunkeye, 2011). Whatever name it is called, the fact remains that this menace adversely affects the profession and its practitioners in varying degrees across the world.

Brown envelope syndrome manifests itself in all areas of journalistic practices. For instance, getting journalists to cover events has long required an informal

payment of some sort. In addition, getting them to publish stories appears to be no different, with 'envelope' journalism. The reach of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism seems undeniable, even if it has now taken on new forms. This is why Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) regard it as a new form of news commercialisation.

Adeyemi and Okorie (2010) agree that the euphemism, 'Brown Envelope', originated from the practice among Ghanaians to discreetly enclose bribe money in envelopes, not necessarily brown ones, rather than exposing it. Looking at the origin of the brown envelope syndrome from the Nigerian perspective, Nwabueze (2010, p. 495) says it has its root in the culture of presenting kolanuts to visitors, a hospitality practice common in many African societies. However, with the advent of modernisation, this originally well-meaning practice, with other values in society deteriorated.

Omenugha and Oji (2010) narrate how the issue of ethical conduct of journalists came up in a workshop that was organized for working journalists in Anambra State of Nigeria by the State Ministry of information. The journalists made no pretence about their receiving forms of payment for themselves or for their media houses to publish stories. According to them, how could they do otherwise when they receive poor and irregular salaries; some media houses do not have salary system at

all. According to them, a journalist's chances of survival depend on how much she/he gets from news sources. They said that the harsh economic situation has a telling effect on their job. The Nigerian society, they noted, is corrupt thereby increasing their difficulty in being ethical in an 'unethical world' such as Nigeria. In addition, publishers, they said, complain of high cost of production and as such use that as an excuse to deny them their due wages.

From the above perspective, it is clear that quite often, those journalists who accept brown envelopes defend their actions with statements such as "if you don't eat, you won't stop them eating; if you don't eat, you starve; if you can't beat them, join them; eat or you will be eaten", etc. In other words, journalists encourage themselves to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thereby propagating the brown envelope syndrome in journalism. Journalists cannot afford this kind of false comfort. As watchdogs, Akinfeleye (2007) argues, journalists have the sacred duty to guard and guide the society on the path of equity and fairness, and expose acts of injustice and their perpetrators.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of this paper is to examine the perceptions of the brown envelope syndrome among journalists and its influence on journalism practice in Nigeria. Specifically, this paper sought to:

1. Find out what the journalists perceive as brown envelope syndrome in journalism practice in Nigeria.
2. Investigate journalists' views on the areas in which the brown envelope syndrome manifests in journalism practice in Nigeria.
3. Ascertain journalists' view on the causes of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism practice in Nigeria.
4. Find out how the brown envelope syndrome has affected journalism practice in Nigeria.
5. Determine the role of professional bodies in tackling the problem of brown envelope in journalism practice in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to give this paper the required direction, the following research questions were posed for investigation:

1. What is the journalists' perception of brown envelope syndrome in journalism practice in Nigeria?
2. What areas do journalists perceive the brown envelope syndrome to be manifest in journalism practice in Nigeria?
3. What do the journalists perceive as the causes of the brown envelope syndrome in

- journalism practice in Nigeria?
4. To what extent has the brown envelope syndrome affected journalism practice in Nigeria?
 5. What is the role of professional bodies in journalism in tackling the problem of brown envelope syndrome in journalism practice in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kasoma (2008) studied the Zambian public relations (PR) practitioner's perspectives on "brown envelopes" and freebies with the main objective of examining the phenomenon from the perspective of PR practitioners. In-depth interviews conducted with 15 PR practitioners in Zambia showed that while they perceived "brown envelopes" as unethical, unprofessional and detested any association with them, they were surprisingly responsive to freebies. The reason for their responsiveness was threefold: (1) PR practitioners perceived freebies as an inevitable offshoot of the interdependent relationship they shared with journalists; (2) PR practitioners perceived freebies as part of their news management function; and (3) PR practitioners perceived freebies as instrumental in achieving their boundary spanning role.

Dirbaba (2010) also studied the growing influence of bribery in Ethiopian journalism and concludes that bribery, including gifts of plots

of land as well as money, is widespread among journalists in Ethiopia, and is spreading to supervisors and assignment editors, including those in the upper leadership. The study unearthed five major mechanisms of diffusion of bribery among journalists: continuing older traditions, sources inducing journalists to accept bribes, organizational resource constraints, coaching by older colleagues, and social interaction among friends. Although further research is required to see whether cultural factors trigger and intensify bribery, it is suggested that the influence of cultural traditions of greeting enticements are minimal as compared to political and economic pressures. According to the study, the major harmful influences of bribery are that it thwarts creativity, generates antagonistic relationships, and challenges democratic professionalism in Ethiopian journalism. Overall, the study found that bribery has become a dangerous threat hampering the development of more open, competitive and democratic professional journalism in Ethiopia.

Nwabueze (2010) worked on the perception of Nigerian journalists about brown envelopes and the need for ethical re-orientation. The study was aimed at finding out from practising journalists what their perception of the brown envelope syndrome is, including their views regarding why the syndrome has continued to exist in the profession.

The study employed survey research design. The major findings show that the basic reason behind the continued existence of the syndrome in journalism is the orientation of journalists. Most of the journalists see nothing wrong with the acceptance of brown envelopes. The study recommended that the welfare of professionals should be improved to provoke a change in the perception and attitude towards the acceptance of brown envelopes.

Okoro and Ugwuanyi (2006) conducted a study on brown envelope syndrome and mass media objectivity in Nigeria. Using the survey research method, they sought to find out if journalists in Nigeria accept brown envelopes and if such action affects journalists' social responsibility and objectivity in reporting. Findings revealed that journalists in Nigeria accept brown envelopes because of poor conditions of service and lack of adherence to ethical standards. They also found out that such actions affect mass media objectivity negatively. The study recommended, among others, that the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and other relevant agencies should ensure strict application and compliance to professional ethics and standards by practising journalists.

Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2010) did a similar study on the "Perception of Lagos-based journalists on brown envelope syndrome (BES) in the coverage of news events in Nigeria" and

confirmed like other similar studies before it that BES exist and the issue has become institutionalized within the Nigerian media circles. They surveyed and interviewed Lagos-based journalists to reach their conclusions. Various reasons ranging from poor remuneration, lack of welfare package for journalists in the industry to Government and media proprietors' lack of interest in the industry were given as justifiable excuses why the issue cannot be tackled. The journalists in the study proposed that after the establishment of a healthy/competitive rewards system and welfare packages, the existing Code of Journalistic Practice should be strengthened to tackle the menace.

Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012, p. 526) agree with this position in similar argument but note that enforcement remains the missing link in earlier efforts to eradicate the malady thus:

However, our worry here is that this code has been in existence for more than a decade now and still BES has become even more hydra-headed and complex in its application. This malady has become institutionalized in the Nigerian media industry, that eradicating it seems herculean. But the truth remains that no matter how long a disease stays in the human body, it does not make it right or become

part of the original human mechanism or system. Therefore, enforcement of the various codes that preach professionalism is the only way to ensure ethical conduct and behaviour amongst journalists and other categories of media practitioners. This is what we consider, from our empirical findings, as the missing link in the quest to rid the media industry in Nigeria from the monster called BES.

METHOD

From each of the five states in the South-East, Nigeria, namely; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, ten journalism practitioners were purposively selected for interview, making 50 journalists. An interview guide (Brown Envelop Syndrome Interview Guide) was used to collect information from the interviewees. The interview guide was made up of ten simple open-ended questions. The instrument was face validated by two experts in the Department of Mass Communication, and one expert in measurement and evaluation from the Department of Science Education, all from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This face validation was carried out in order to ensure the adequacy of the language used, enhance understanding of the questions, and ensure that the instruments cover the

necessary areas and measure actually what it sets out to measure.

To ensure reliability, the instrument was pre-tested using 30 persons from three states having boundaries with South-Eastern states. The states were Delta, Kogi and Benue. The data obtained from the pre-test was used to obtain a reliability coefficient of 0.78 for the interview guide respectively using Cronbach's Alpha method of internal consistency.

The selected practitioners were general assignment and beat reporters who are engaged in field reporting. There were 39 male practitioners and 11 female practitioners. Of the 50 practitioners, 15 had more than 5 years of experience, 22 had more than 7 years, while 13 had more than ten years of experience.

Face-to-face and phone interviews were used for the 50 journalism practitioners by the researchers. They were informed ahead of time and appointment was made. The intention of the researchers was to have a face-to-face interview with the journalists but those who could not be reached were interviewed on phone. The face-to-face interviews lasted for 20-35 minutes while the telephone interviews lasted for 15-20 minutes.

The data analysis was presented quantitatively although the practitioners' responses were given qualitatively. Responses were abstracted from journalists' responses and given numerical values. The responses are an

aggregation of the total responses, not individual responses from given options. In essence, most of the items in the tables are similar ways of viewing the issues raised in the various questions.

The journalists described the brown envelop syndrome in the terms listed in Table 1 below. The statements were isolated from individual responses, and not necessarily a result of choices from any options provided by the researchers.

RESULTS

Table 1: Journalists' Perception of the Brown Envelope Syndrome

RESPONSES	%
Receiving bribe	14
Neglect of ethical requirement	8
Refusing to publish stories	16
Being influenced in the course of duty	4
Soliciting for gratification in order to suppress the truth	10
Accepting payment for news publication	22
Transferring of different kinds rewards	14
A monetary bribe to an unethical person	8
Giving money to officials to perform their duties	4
TOTAL	100% n= 50

Source: Authors Field work

The selected journalists agreed that the brown envelope means the soliciting or accepting bribe, gratification or patronage in order to suppress the truth. This means that wherever or whenever people accept any form of patronage or gifts in order to cover up the truth, the brown envelope syndrome is at work. On areas where this negative phenomenon manifests most, the

journalists identified the following areas: public relations practice, advertising, publishing, news editing, news reporting, investigative journalism, photojournalism, and news sourcing. However, on the balance of scale, the journalists said that the brown envelope syndrome manifests mostly in news sourcing followed by news reporting. According to journalism

practitioners, the brown envelope syndrome manifests in all aspects of journalism in one way or the other. Some practitioners even said that the brown envelope syndrome manifests in some very important meetings where journalists demand for some amount of money before they could attend. Where this is not done, such meetings are blacklisted and sometimes blacked out no matter the degree of importance to the public who suffer the right to know. It was

also found that journalists who source and report news stories are the major culprits in this.

The paper also sought to determine what the journalists perceive as the major causes of brown envelope syndrome. Table 2 shows the aggregate of the responses from the answers provided by the journalists. Also included is the number of journalists who had similar or gave the same answers.

Table 2: Journalists’ Perception of the Causes of the Brown Envelope Syndrome in Journalism Practice in Nigeria

ITEM	%
Poor remuneration	6
Poor journalistic training	44
Harsh economic situation	6
Too much corruption	14
High cost of production	4
Pressure	6
Lack of self worth	10
Greed	4
Delay in payment of salaries	2
Lack of seriousness	1
TOTAL	100% N= 50

Source: Authors Field work

Majority of the journalists (44%) did not accept that brown envelop was caused by poor remuneration or economic hardship. Instead, they insisted that journalism is not a poor man’s job, and that well-trained journalists are getting enough to get by. Most of the journalists saw those engaging in brown envelop as those who were not well trained. None of them

agreed that they had ever done anything that could be seen as accepting or demanding brown envelopes in the discharge of their professional duties. These crop of journalists argue that people do not necessarily get involved in corruption as a result of poverty. The argue that some people accept bribes even while financially comfortable, noting that character weakness, lack

of professionalism and adequate training as the major factors fanning the embers of this corrupt practice. The journalists in this group insisted that poverty should not be used as an excuse for being corrupt as the final choice lies with the journalists to

defend the integrity of the profession and maintain individual integrity. The paper also sought to assess the perception of the journalists on the influences of this negative syndrome on the practice of journalism in Nigeria. The responses are summarized on Table 3 below:

Table 3: Journalists’ Perception of the Influences of the Brown Envelope Syndrome on Journalism Practice in Nigeria

ITEM	%
Dearth of good and quality journalists	14%
Corruption and mediocrity in the industry	46%
Makes journalists accomplices with looters	8%
Makes journalists toothless	12%
Professionalism and ethics are trampled	14%
Truth is covered up	2%
Journalists lose courage	2%
Important issues are down played	2%
TOTAL	100% n= 50

Source: Authors Field work

The journalism practitioners revealed that brown envelope influences the journalism profession negatively. Almost as if they had consulted one another, the journalists regretted that the main effect of brown envelop was corruption and mediocrity. The result shows that majority of the respondents are of the opinion that the brown envelope syndrome influences journalism practice because important issues are downplayed while unimportant issues are exaggerated. Even when

important issues are played up, they are not handled in ways that call up important questions about the issues played up. This means that a journalist who accepts such gifts does his/her duty at the dictates of the giver of the gifts. Sometimes, stories that have no consequences to the society are published because gifts have changed hands. The journalist who engages in such act is not bold enough to defend his/her publications because he or she has been compromised.

Table 4: Respondents’ Perception of the Role of Professional Bodies in Tackling the Brown Envelope Syndrome in Journalism Practice in Nigeria

ITEM	%
Strive for national recognition	6
Induct graduates in the union	12
Work out salary scale for workers	10
Ensure journalists welfare are not neglected	42
Ensure adherence to the codes of ethics	4
Ensure only graduates practice journalism	8
Ensure that practitioners are registered	4
Charlatans should be flushed out of the industry	6
Improve journalists welfare to boost their self worth	2
News organization should be serious in maintaining ethics	2
Training and retraining of journalists	4
Total	100% N= 50

Source: Authors Field work

Media practitioners appeared reluctant in accepting that poor remuneration was responsible for brown envelope syndrome. However, they are of the opinion that the solution lies in upgrading the welfare of journalists. They also believe that professional bodies can tackle the problem of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism by ensuring that news organization is serious in maintaining high ethical standards. According to the practitioners, dealing with the brown envelope syndrome in the profession requires adherence to journalistic codes and ethics. They also said that journalists should understand the position they occupy in society and therefore, resist every demeaning and unprofessional conduct. They also appealed to the various journalism unions to sit up and fight

for the cause of the profession as other professions do.

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

Several issues were revealed in the course of this study. This is evident from the responses to the research questions as shown below:

Research Question 1: What do you understand by the term ‘Brown Envelope Syndrome’?

Response to this question shows that the brown envelope syndrome means the soliciting or accepting of bribe, gratification or patronage in order to suppress the truth. This means that wherever or whenever people accept any form of patronage or gifts in order to cover up the truth, the brown envelope syndrome is at work. The interview

conducted with journalism practitioners in the South-East, also revealed that the brown envelope practice ranges from asking for a bribe, collecting bribe, giving of bribe, or any form of patronage in order to do something for the giver or to leave undone what should have been done. This is in line with the findings of Skjerdal (2010, p. 370) which state that the term 'brown envelope' is applied to denote a corrupt practice which involves transfer of various types of rewards from a person to another party as the case may be.

Research Question 2: In What Areas do the Brown Envelope Syndrome Manifest in Journalism?

Answers to this question revealed that the brown envelope syndrome manifests in all aspects of journalism. However, further analysis shows that it manifests most in the sourcing and reporting of news stories. This is in line with the findings of Gillmor (2006) that the brown envelope syndrome manifests in areas of journalism generally.

Research Question 3: What are the causes of the brown envelope syndrome in Nigeria?

Following the responses to this question, it is evident that poor training is the major cause of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism. Findings from the interview conducted with journalism practitioners revealed that lack of adherence to ethical standard, poor remuneration and greed are the

causes of the brown envelope syndrome in Nigeria. They however, agreed that poverty should not be used as an excuse for being corrupt as the final choice lies with the journalists to defend the integrity of their profession. This is in agreement with the finding of Akinfeleye (2007) that most journalists embrace corruption not because they cannot make ends meet, but because they have the desire to acquire more. He, however, argued that journalists as watchdogs cannot afford to allow materialistic tendencies to jeopardize the noble profession.

Research Question 4: What are the Influences of the Brown Envelope Syndrome on Journalism Practice in Nigeria?

Answers emanating from this question showed that the brown envelope influences journalism practice negatively because important issues are downplayed while unimportant issues are exaggerated. This means that a journalist who is involved in the brown envelope syndrome does his/her duty at the dictates of the giver of the brown envelope. Sometimes, stories that are of no consequence to the society are published and good stories killed because the journalist has been compromised.

Research Question 5: What are the Roles of professional Bodies in Tackling the Problem of Brown Envelope Syndrome in Journalism Practice in Nigeria?

Responses to this question showed that to tackle the problem of the brown envelope syndrome in journalism practice in Nigeria, professional bodies need to ensure that news organizations are serious in maintaining high ethical standards and professionalism. This is because when media take ethics seriously, practitioners will sit up to their professional calling and responsibility.

From the interview conducted with the media practitioners, it was discovered that to deal with the brown envelope syndrome in the profession, adherence to journalistic codes and ethics is very essential. They also opined that journalists should understand the position they occupy in governance and therefore, resist every professional misconduct. They also appealed to the union to fight for the good course of the profession as expected.

This finding further supports the conclusion of Hassan (2010) that in curbing the cancer of the brown envelope syndrome, the NUJ and other media professional bodies need to exercise their prerogative of collective bargaining in pushing forward an attractive welfare package for members. It is after this that such bodies can have the moral authority to deal with issues of professional misconduct among members.

CONCLUSION

The fact that the brown envelope syndrome is about to destroy the

lofty height, which the journalism practice has attained in Nigeria, should be a source of concern to journalism practitioners and stakeholders in the profession. Wherever the brown envelope culture exists, truth is often suppressed and the highest bidder usually gets away with injustice and unfair treatment. This is the major reason this paper calls for concerted efforts in dealing with the monster.

In conclusion, professional bodies within the media industry should improve on the implementation of the various ethical codes in the industry and efforts should be geared towards an improved welfare package for members. Subsequent professional misconduct by members should be squarely dealt with and erring members adequately sanctioned. This is the way to go in curbing the ill effects of brown envelope syndrome in the Nigerian media industry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested as a way forward in dealing with negative consequences of brown envelope syndrome:

1. Media professional bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the media industry by sanctioning defaulting journalists to ensure that journalism practitioners

- adhere to laid down codes of practice.
2. The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and other media professional bodies should ensure that there is real unionism in the profession by ensuring that journalists' rights are not trampled upon. These bodies should also put in place a mechanism for the negotiation of a better pay package for journalists.
 3. Journalists should not see the act of news sourcing and

- reporting as a means of acquiring personal gains but as a means of performing their function as gatekeepers and agenda-setters in public service.
4. Media professional bodies should find a way of disciplining defaulting journalists in order to control the brown envelope syndrome, which is ruining the journalism profession in Nigeria.

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AUTHORS' INFORMATION

Dr. Nnanyelugo OKORO is a Senior Lecturer and current Head, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.

Blessing CHINWEOBO-ONUOHA is a Research Fellow in the Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.