

Deepening Our Democracy: Role of the Nigerian Editor

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1. Preamble

Let me begin by thanking the Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE) for the choice of theme for this Conference, and for inviting me to share my thoughts on that theme, namely the role of the Nigerian Editor in deepening our democracy. It is instructive that the organisers of this Conference already recognise – as the Invitation Letter to me indicates – that the Nigerian democracy is hard won, after many years of military rule, and that it needs to be deepened and nurtured. That recognition provides me a useful canvass on which to set out my thoughts and prescriptions in this address.

The power of the media in shaping society, setting agenda for public discourse and moulding public opinion is long-standing and legendary. That, I guess, was why the 3rd President of the United States and principal author of its Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), once said: “The press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral and social being.” Jefferson’s immediate successor as U.S. President, James Madison (1751-1836), corroborated this view when he said: “To the press alone, chequered as it is with abuses, the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error

and oppression.”

The media, therefore, are vital instruments of humanity’s emancipation. But they wouldn’t be what they should be without the strategic role of Editors, who are the chief gatekeepers and principal content mediators between their respective organs and the public. I also find it instructive that the organisers of this Conference – again, as the Invitation Letter to me indicates – already appreciate that the Editor plays a crucial role in information dissemination, moulding and influencing public opinion. This reality underscores the position of the Editor as a guardian angel (of some sort) of society’s sanity, survival and advancement. That privileged position, however, imposes a heavy burden of responsibility on the Editor; and it is one burden that should not be handled tritely or carelessly in the discharge of that strategic duty.

2. Background

A fitting background for our discourse here on the role of the Editor in deepening the Nigerian democracy is the April 2011 general election. The present Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), as you well know, was inaugurated on June 30, 2011, following what could be described as a clear national consensus on the need for free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria. Ever since the military exited from power in 1999, Nigerians, as many scholars of Nigerian politics observed, have aspired for democracy but have continuously been disappointed. The re-advent of civil rule in 1999 opened fresh opportunities for democratisation; but those opportunities were progressively squandered through poorly conducted elections, leaving most Nigerians in a crisis of rising expectations. That crisis was perhaps most acute following the 2007 elections which many observers adjudged discreditable, and which dashed many hopes for consolidation of democracy in our country.

It was such that, following the 2007 elections, even the winner of that election,

the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, acknowledged the need for electoral reforms. He eventually constituted the Justice Mohammed Uwais Committee, which made recommendations for electoral reform. Thus, the new INEC was inaugurated, I believe, amidst great expectations for getting things right this time around. Those expectations were anchored on a strong national aspiration for free, fair and credible elections. Following our inauguration, INEC received overwhelming support and encouragement from a wide range of stakeholders – domestic and international. The Commission commenced work with a commitment to obey the rules, to be impartial and non-partisan, to create a level playing field for all political parties and contestants, and to be open and accessible in the discharge of its responsibilities.

By the then existing legal framework, INEC was required to conduct elections in January 2011. Initially, the Commission tried to operate within that legal and extremely tight time-frame. But it soon became imperative to seek amendments to both the Electoral Act and the Constitution, to allow a more realistic time-frame for the conduct of the elections. Eventually there were amendments to the Constitution and the Electoral Act, allowing elections to hold in April 2011 and affording the Commission an elbow-room to compile a fresh Voters Register from January 16 to February 8.

3. Compiling a New Voters Register

When we came into office, our Commission appraised what we met on ground and came to the conclusion that it was absolutely necessary to compile a fresh Voters Register. The register that we inherited, which was compiled by the former Commission in 2006, was bedevilled with many inadequacies such as missing names, missing photographs, multiple registrants, under-age registrants, fictitious names and photographs grafted from Almanacs and portraits, among others. We had no doubt that a credible Voters Register was *sine qua non* for credible elections. Hence, we took the decision to compile a

new register. Of course, this entailed committing significant resources of time, money and energy to its production; but we believed it was worth the expenses. We opted for biometric data capture using laptop-based Direct Data Capture Machines (DDCMs). In view of the time constraint, the Commission adopted a methodology involving the following:

- Procurement and deployment of DDCMs to each of about 120,000 polling units across the country, plus 10 per cent redundancies (132,000).
- Recruitment, training and deployment of 400,000 ad-hoc staff, mostly National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members and students of tertiary institutions.
- Establishment of 9000 Registration Area Centres (RACs) for field administration services, such as recharging the DDCMs at the end of each working day during the registration, and for aggregation of data brought in daily from the field.

Before embarking on the registration of voters, the Commission established the exact location of polling units throughout the country and verified the number to be 199, 976 – which is just 24 short of the 120,000 that was on record.

In approximately three weeks, and in spite of formidable challenges, the Commission was able to register about 73.5 million eligible voters who were 18 years and above, and issued each with a temporary (cold laminated) bar-coded voter's card with unique identification numbers. Thus, a huge national asset of databases has been established in each of the 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), as well as at the national level in Abuja; with equally secure disaster recovery centres. From this, INEC has the largest electronic database in the country presently, with valuable biometric information (names, photos, addresses, fingerprints and telephone numbers).

The customized registration software that we used was developed in-house by a group of brilliant Nigerian software engineers; and we used the Advanced

Fingerprint Identification Software (AFIS) which enabled us to detect and eliminate multiple registrations. Over 800,000 multiple registrants were identified and removed from the register; some of these are already being prosecuted and many more will still face prosecution.

1. Conducting the Elections

Having done what we considered a credible voters registration exercise – it wasn't perfect, but it was credible enough to be a very good foundation for conducting the elections – we proceeded with making adequate preparations for the elections. In doing that, we identified significant lessons learnt from past mistakes and factored them into our preparations for the April elections. And there were some key lessons that we learnt from the past. I, in particular, was privileged to serve in the Justice Mohammed Uwais Committee which interacted with ranges of stakeholders throughout Nigeria and compiled many data and information on the failures of past elections in Nigeria. The new INEC was able to identify the factors which undermined the credibility of past elections and we tried our best to address them, while good practices were adopted/retained and improved upon. We tried to creatively and pragmatically adapt/introduce new measures and procedures drawn from comparative global experiences, to bring additional transparency and credibility to the electoral process. Specific issues and concerns addressed include:

- How to prevent multiple voting, snatching and stuffing of Ballot Boxes
- How to detect and prevent the use of fake Ballot Papers
- How to detect and prevent fraudulent declaration of results
- How to ensure secure and timely distribution of election materials, and to secure the voting environment
- How to bring greater transparency and accountability in voting and result collation procedures, by minimizing the role of career / permanent INEC staff in collation and announcement of results.

The new measures that we introduced to address these challenges include:

- Additional security features and unique serial numbering and identification for Ballot Boxes
- Additional security features, serial numbering and color-coding of Ballot Papers, which were produced on constituency basis
- A new voting procedure called Re-Modified Open Ballot System (REMOBS)
- A phased and decentralized distribution of election materials
- Greater coordination of the roles of security agencies in elections
- Use of persons with integrity as Collation and Returning Officers, mostly chosen from tertiary institutions (Senior Lecturers / Professors as LG and constituency COs and ROs and VCs / DVCs as presidential State COs and gubernatorial ROs)
- Facilitation of transparent and timely collation and announcement of results, with audio-visual recording and live media coverage

Thus, we did our best to learn from lessons of the past in establishing procedures, measures and mechanisms for a transparent process, and to bring additional credibility to the process.

1. **Accomplishments?!**

Some people have said the Jury is still out there, in terms of whether there were substantive or substantial accomplishments. Nonetheless, according to many observers – both domestic and foreign – the following are noteworthy:

- A more credible Register of Voters
- An important and valuable biometric Database, which is formidable national asset
- Re-Modified Open Ballot System(REMOBS), which allowed for transparent voting and result announcement procedures at the polling units

- Remarkably reduced levels of electoral fraud, especially involving staff of INEC
- Substantially improved operational and logistical preparations, especially in the deployment of personnel and election materials
- Remarkably fewer number of post-election petitions at the tribunals
- Freer, more credible and peaceful elections than ever before in Nigeria's electoral history

1. **Challenges!!!**

In spite of the modest gains, INEC confronted some challenges that were wide-ranging, and especially associated with the following:

- At least 300,000 ad hoc staff were recruited and trained for the registration of voters and over 400,000 were recruited and trained for the elections. Conducting the training was a logistical nightmare, requiring immense resources
- Voter education and public enlightenment required the utilization of a multiplicity of traditional, conventional and new media and appropriate methodologies, which consumed a lot of resources
- Distribution, retrieval and storage of sensitive election materials
- Deployment of election officials, especially electoral officers, returning officers, collation officers, supervisory officers, etc.; the logistical requirements of doing these were enormous
- Deployment of security personnel and securing personnel and materials
- Handling of nomination of candidates by political parties; hampered by lack of internal party democracy, abuse of court processes and self-serving utilization of Section 31 of the Electoral Act as amended
- Operating and maintenance of DDCMs during the registration of voters

1. **The Media and the Pathway Forward**

It is perhaps trite to say that whatever gains were recorded in the April elections

would have been impossible without the massive support of the media for our Commission and the electoral process. In graphic demonstration of the national consensus on free, fair and credible elections, a predominant segment of the Nigerian media was constantly up-front with information to sensitize the public on matters relating to the electoral processes – many times at little or no cost to our Commission. Generally speaking, you could say the various media – conventional and social – acquitted themselves as vital instruments “for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral and social being” which Thomas Jefferson held them to be. Of course, there were a few sore points of negative use of the media, but these were minor compared with the overall positive use and impact.

Prior to the April elections, our Commission literally ‘hit the ground running’ after it was inaugurated in June 2010. The pace of work was frenetic, with no respite or time for careful strategic thinking and long term planning; as we plunged into preparations and procurement for, and conduct of registration of voters and the elections. Now that all these are relatively successfully over, we have moved into the phase of careful, strategic and contemplative planning and preparations for future elections. An outline of the post-election programme of activities of INEC can be surmised as follows:

- i. Assessment and Evaluation
 - Retreats (which have been concluded)
 - Independent Study (which is on-going)
- i. Continuous refinement and improvement of the electoral process
 - Learn the lessons of 2011 elections and factor them into future plans
 - Especially pay attention to matters arising, such as :
 - Complaints and accompanying litigation
 - Results collation and transmission procedures
 - Sustainable, continuous registration of voters

- Sustainable, continuous civic and voters' education
- i. Institution-building
- Making INEC a much more effective and efficient EMB through:
 - Re-organization and re-structuring
 - Increased professionalism, through training and recruitment
 - Enhanced competency in and utilization of ICT
 - Strengthening state and local government offices and insulating them from local political pressures
- i. Strengthening the capacity of The Electoral Institute
 - By enhancing its capacity for training and research to serve national and sub-regional requirements
- i. Continuous improvement of electoral security
 - Strengthening relations and coordination of activities with security agencies
 - Addressing causes and consequences of post-election violence
- i. Prosecuting Electoral Offenders
 - Improve the capacity of the legal department
 - Strengthen partnership with NBA
- i. Pursue additional Legal reforms
 - Necessary additional amendment to the Electoral Act
- i. Constituency Delineation
 - Review of constituencies and polling units in view of demographic changes, etc.
- i. Improve relations between INEC and
 - Executive and Legislative Arms of government
 - State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs)
 - Civil Society Organizations
 - Development Partners

- Other Election Management Bodies (EMBs)
- Etc.

Just as the media were instrumental to the modest successes recorded in the April 2011 elections, very little can be achieved in the present strategic phase of INEC's operations without their continual support for, and collaboration with the Commission. Specific areas where the media have crucial roles to play include the following:

- Build consensus in the public on necessary but sensitive issues like Constituency Delineation
- Promote peace, rule of law and security through adherence to the social responsibility ethic of journalistic practice
- Promote good governance by holding public institutions accountable and insisting on transparency – which the media are all the more strengthened to do now with the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act
- Engage the public in sustained civic education and voter enlightenment, to eliminate causal factors of election-related violence
- Encourage political pluralism by allowing equal air time / print space for ruling and opposition political parties, especially during electioneering
- Fight corruption in public and private sectors, and impunity in electoral conduct through advocacy-reporting
- Defend fundamental freedoms and human rights of all

1. **The Role of the Editor**

I suggested earlier on that the Editor has a strategic role to play in media operation, being the chief gatekeeper and principal content mediator between his medium and the public. But in the *realpolitik* of the media industry, this role is encumbered by such factors as acute time pressure involved in news production, the subjective tendencies of proprietorial interest, the

new challenge posed to media professionalism by citizen journalism, and the increasingly hobbled economics of conventional media operation in the face of cost-free social media outing. The bitter truth is that these factors have compromised the performance of the Nigerian Editor – well, just as any other the world over. There is, for example, what American oncologist Jerome Groopman refers to as “cognitive cherry-picking” in medical practice, which finds application in contemporary journalistic practice. Groopman explains this tendency as “a shortcut in thinking by doctors who judge their current cases by past cases, latching on to a diagnosis by selecting only those symptoms that confirm their original hypothesis (i.e. presumption), while ignoring contraindicating ones.” Drawing a parallel in media practice regarding this tendency, one-time journalist with the NBC and former Press Secretary to the late American President Gerald Ford, Ron Nessen, said: “There’s a cynical expression – ‘too good to check.’ There are some stories you don’t want to spend too much time checking because you don’t want to find out you’re wrong.” I should say that in certain cases, the trend of reporting Nigeria’s political processes has betrayed the Editor’s relapse to “cognitive cherry-picking,” which isn’t healthy for our democracy.

Another dimension of this tendency is what some researchers have called “the echo chamber effect.” In Nigeria, particularly, this tendency has been largely inspired by subjective interests and alliances of media proprietors, whether they be private or government. That is why some media organs play up certain views to the exclusion or relegation of alternative views. We have seen some broadcast media devote generous airtime to some political parties while denying other parties such exposure, even when those parties are willing to pay their way. Susan Jacoby in her book, *The Age of American Unreason*, wrote: “What we have is a situation in which people go to hear other people they already agree with. What’s going on is not so much

of education as reinforcement of the opinions you already have. The echo chamber, in a sense, is speaking to oneself.” When you read in newspapers or hear on broadcast channels some reports on Nigeria’s political processes, you cannot fail to see the echo chamber effect in the selection of sources, respondents, analysts, etc. featured in such reports. In short, there is no objectivity; and this isn’t doing much to help objective understanding of issues by the public. That, I think, is an industry failing the Editor should do all in his power to redress.

The Nigerian Editor is well positioned to water the tendrils of our democracy and help in enthroning the culture of good governance. I would say this is as much an ethical obligation as it is in the Editor’s best interest, since the media and journalistic practice thrive best in a liberal environment afforded by functional democracy. In INEC, we have always viewed the media, and indeed Editors, as cherished allies in the on-going task of democratic acculturation of our country. That is why we covet your continuing partnership in sustained voter enlightenment and civic education, and in building public consensus on the political processes ahead. That, also, is why we will always count on your patriotic commitment and responsibility to see our country to safe shores of robust and stable democracy.

Thank you.