



Assault of the 3 Ghanaian Times Journalists:

Policy Paths to Improving Safety of Journalists' Situation in Ghana

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Introduction

On Thursday, March 14, 2019, 10 Policemen and a military man assaulted three reporters of the state-owned Ghanaian Times newspaper who were on their way cover some events in Accra.

Malik Sullemana, a court reporter; Raissa Sambou, a general reporter; and Salifu Abdul Rahman, an assistant editor, were physically brutalized. The assault followed a scuffle between the journalists and a policeman, Sergeant Ebenezer Akrofi, who had jumped traffic with his motor bicycle and broken the bumper, side mirror and windscreen of the saloon car in which the reporters were travelling to their assigned destinations.

Malik, who tried recording the scuffle, was pounced on and physically assaulted by 10 police officers (nine other policemen and military officer had joined the fray on the side of their colleague. The assault also led to Mrs. Sambou, a nursing mother who had given birth through caesarean session, being admitted at the emergency unit of a nearby hospital while Malik was briefly detained at the Ministries Police Station and later released.

The incident attracted widespread condemnations against the security officers and solidarity with the journalists from many interest groups, civil society, the media and the general public, prompting the leadership of the Ghana Police Service to respond by interdicting three of the police officers and arraigning one of them before the courts.

While the police authorities' response to the assault and subsequent public uproar has so far been encouraging, the incident has highlighted a number of critical issues in the Ghanaian media landscape that this policy brief seeks to recommend as paths to improving safety of journalists' situation in Ghana.

Background

The Ghanaian media landscape has been generally free. Freedom of expression, media freedom and media independence are explicitly guaranteed by the 1992 Constitution. Fortunately, just three weeks ago, the RTI Bill that had lingered in Ghana's Parliament for years was passed awaiting the President's assent.

Ghana is ranked as one of the freest countries in the West Africa region and Africa as a whole in terms of press freedom. Despite the constitutional provisions and international recognition, some freedom of expression rights continue to be violated across the country by state security agents, state officials, political activists, religious groups and other individuals.

The assault of the three journalists by the security agents exemplifies one of the many incidents of freedom expression violations that continuously blight the free expression environment in Ghana.

Approach

The policy brief employs a qualitative content analysis approach to review over two weeks news reports from various media outlets on the assault of the three Ghanaian Times Journalists to draw key lessons for improving the safety of journalists' situation in Ghana.

Impressive Media Reports

The aftermath of the assault incident, which was dubbed GT3, saw massive media solidarity. Even though previous similar assaults of journalist have been often reported, they hardly make headlines. At best, reports of the attack will be published in the victim's newspaper, radio or TV news broadcast. Sometimes, a few media outlets republish that report or discuss it, and the chapter gets closed.

In the recent incident, however, a lot of attention was given to the case and any news items related to it by both state-owned and privately-owned newspapers, radio and TV stations.



A cross-section of newspaper reports on the assault case - the Ghanaian Times, Daily Graphic, The Finder and Chronicle newspapers

As captured in the picture above, the media reports covered both the incident and subsequent developments. Statements by state institutions and civil society organisations were also given prominence in the media. Some TV and radio stations hosted individuals from media groups and associations, as well as civil society, to discuss the issue. The media, with one voice, were fighting for their own which was impressive.

Some print media outlets, including the Ghanaian Times, The Finder, and Daily Guide newspapers came up with editorial pieces condemning the act and calling for investigation and justice.

A high-powered delegation made up of editors and senior reporters of the sister state-owned newspaper, Daily Graphic, actually paid a visit to the victims at the offices of the New Times Corporation (NTC) to support and commiserate with them. They also assured them they “would continue to [stoke the fire until justice is served.](#)”

Rousing Public Outcry

As soon as news of the assault was heard, several Ghanaians, including journalists went all out to unreservedly condemn the abuse on social media and call on the police administration to act fast to bring justice to the victims. From individuals to media groups and associations, civil society, state institutions and government, the message was same – condemnation and a call for investigation so the culprits could be punished.



Sampled views of individuals on Twitter on the assault of the Ghanaian Times Journalists

The role of the media and journalists is crucial for national development. Therefore, such incidents of assaults on the press must be of great concern to the general public as much as it for the media.

Demands by Media Groups and CSOs



The media regulator, National Media Commission (NMC), and the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) condemned the incident with the GJA calling it “barbaric.”

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) also issued a statement expressing shock at “[the brutal assault](#)” and calling on the GPS “...to demonstrate their abhorrence of the unprofessional behaviour of the officers involved by bringing them to book.”

The West Africa Nobles Forum also expressed concern about the increasing assault on journalists and civilians by the police, and called on the police administration to demonstrate its commitment to punish the errant personnel among them. “...there is one too many cases in recent times where policemen who beat journalists are let off the hook,” the spokesperson of the West Africa Nobles Forum said ¹

The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) also issued a statement vehemently condemning the assault. The commission called on the IGP to thoroughly investigate the issue and then prosecute those found culpable in a court of competent jurisdiction and “not put them through Administrative Service Disciplinary Enquiry to serve as deterrent to others and to reassure Ghanaians that police officers are not above the law.”²

¹ quote originally published in the Daily Graphic of March 18, 2019

² quote taken from the March 18, 2019 edition of The Finder newspaper, page 4

Police Response

Following the uproar from the media, the media groups, the public and CSOs, the Ghana Police Service (GPS) responded two days later (March 16, 2019) to the assault incident.

Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) David Senanu Eklū, the Director General of Public Affairs, issued a statement that the Police Administration had instituted an investigation into the case and taken a statement from the policeman at the centre of the scuffle.

A week after the abuse was reported in the media, March 21, 2019, the police issued another statement that the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mr David Asante-Apeatu, had directed the interdiction of three policemen, Inspector Isaac Opare, Sergeant Ebenezer Akrofi and Lance Coporal evans Kofi Ntim, for their respective roles in the assault on the journalists.

The statement also indicated that the IGP had directed that investigations into the case should be moved from the Ministries Police Station to the Accra Regional Crime Office while the Commander of the Accra Central Motor Traffic Unit was directed to handle the motor traffic offense committed by Sergeant Akrofi. The Police Professional and Standard Bureau was also tasked to investigate the conduct of the police officers who were on duty at the Ministries Police Station where the incident was reported.

About two weeks after the directive, Sergeant Ebenezer Akrofi was arraigned and [charged with seven counts](#) at the La District Motor Court. He pleaded not guilty to all the charges. He was granted GH¢6,000 bail with a surety. A deposit security of GH¢1,500 was to be paid as part of the bail conditions. Developments concerning the assault are, however, yet to be made public.

Matters Arising

The assault of the three journalists by the police has raised and further highlighted a number of issues that need attention and redress in the media landscape. Some of these issues are very germane to securing the safety of Ghanaian journalists, media workers and the general public as a whole. Below, four of such issues are discussed – report of assault cases to the police by victims, media’s follow-up on the assault, NTC Management’s support and resolve and the challenge impunity poses to the media in the country.

Reporting Assault Cases to the Police

One of the significant issues that have come up following the assault of the three Ghanaian Times journalists (GT3) is the fact that journalists and media personnel

often do not report assault cases to the police. The law requires that victims of assault or crime report to the police for the law to take its rightful course.. It has, however, come up following the assault of the three journalists that the media often take to their platforms to complain and lament about violations against journalists and media workers rather than going to the police to lodge a formal complaint.

From the submissions made by ACP David Eklu on Accra-based radio station, Peace FM, a day or two after the assault, it became apparent that a number of the violations reported in the media are often not reported officially to the police. In the case of the GT3 in particular, he indicated that none of the three journalists had given a formal statement to the police and that he was taking steps to get statements from the victims for onward processing.

It took about three working days, aside two weekend days, from Thursday, March 14, that the assault happened to Tuesday, March 19, to get statements from the victims. Even with that the police went to the New Times Corporation premises to get the statements taken. “Their statements were taken at the New Times Corporation in the presence of Chief of Inspector Salifu Abubakari from the Ministries Police Station,” – ghanaiantimes.com.gh.

From all indications, the police had to take the initiative so they could move the process forward to let the public know they were interested in the case and committed to pursuing it to its logical conclusion. Otherwise, why must the police move to the offices of the victims to take their statements, when in all cases, it is the victim who is supposed to go to the police station to give their statements? It is a fact that an errant police officer had assaulted some journalists, but per the law, the journalists affected were those expected to go and file the case at the police station. Just as journalists serve to keep public officers in check, they must also act in responsible ways as stipulated by the law. Let us report irresponsible and criminal acts to the appropriate quarters to help fight impunity.

Media Follow-ups

The support shown by the Ghanaian media in the first week of the police assault against the three journalists was massive and commendable. The continuous discussion of the issue in the media by the police, CSOs and the general public really highlighted safety of journalists issues and general police brutalities. Just a week after the assault, the continuous debate and pressures from all angles yielded some results – the IGP directed that three police officers be interdicted for their roles in the assault, investigations into the assault be handed over to the Accra Regional Crime Officer, and the motor traffic offense issue be handed over to the Commander of the Accra Central Motor Traffic Unit.

However, by the second week, Thursday, March 28, the assault and related issues were almost fading off the media scene. From the March 28 to Wednesday, April

10, 2019, there had been only a handful of reports about the assault case, at least from the major and influential media outlets. The media appear to be going silent on the issue. Yes, per best practices, the police will ‘supposedly’ continue to do their investigations. And truly, there are, and will be, other equally important emerging issues that need attention and national debate that the media will have to report on. But if the media end up treating this issue as they have done with others in the past, and do not vigorously follow up, it will die out just as the many others have died. We must, however, not let this die out. The media must pursue this issue to its logical conclusion!



Fortunately, a few media houses, including the NTC, have declared their commitment to ensuring that justice is served. So a gentle reminder, first to the NTC: In fact, if any media outlet will keep silent about developments on this issue, the Corporation should be the last to do same. As they have vowed in the above publication, they should do just that. If they could do a weekly publication to remind the police and the powers-that-be, it will be a great way to keep the issue on peoples’ minds.

The editors and senior journalists of the Daily Graphic who went to commiserate with the victims are also reminded of their commitment to “continue to stoke the fire until justice is served³.”

³ quote picked from the March 25 edition of the Ghanaian Times newspaper

The Finder newspaper is equally being reminded of their promise to “do everything to ensure that this incident is not added to the growing list of unresolved cases of assault against journalists by police officers. No. Never. That is our pledge.”⁴ To the other media houses and individuals who promised to support the victims to get justice, this is the time. We risk not getting the justice if we do not continue to keep the issue on top of people’s minds. It does not have to be the headline story, but it must continue to feature.

Let’s walk the talk. The great show of solidarity should be translated into action till justice is served!

NTC Management’s support and resolve

One recommendation that has often been made by the MFWA in its [freedom of expression reports](#) is the need for media owners and managers to denounce violations against their staff and use all means to secure justice for such victims. Accordingly, the solid support from the management of the NTC since the assault occurred is commendable. The NTC management’s “vow to pursue police who brutalised 3 journalists” as in the picture above is a step in the right direction.

Unfortunately, such support and resolve from management is not often exhibited when journalists and media workers of other media houses, especially those in the hinterlands, are attacked. Usually, only a handful of media owners and managers such as those of the Multimedia Group demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding the safety of their journalists and other workers and accordingly fight to get justice for them.

Hopefully, the examples of NTC, the Multimedia Group and a few others will be emulated to demonstrate media owners and managers’ real commitment to the safety and wellbeing of their staff. Attacks against journalists and media workers must not be viewed as the victims’ own issue, but an issue for the entire establishment.

⁴ March 18, 2019 edition of The Finder newspaper, page7.

The Impunity Challenge



[Some journalists who have been abused in recent times](#)

Impunity is one of the major challenges obstructing the safety of journalists in Ghana and elsewhere in the West Africa region as often highlighted in [freedom of expression reports](#) by the MFWA. In fact, if those who commit crimes against journalists, media workers and members of the public at large are not punished or made to pay compensations, then there is little that can be done to forestall the recurrence of such crimes.

As rightly noted by some media publications following the assault and Media Foundation's [reports](#), there have been several brutalities meted out against journalists and media workers that have not been investigated and perpetrators continue to move about freely and unpunished. A typical example is the police assault on [Latif Iddris](#) which has lingered for more than a year (March 27, 2019 was exactly a year since the police attacked the journalist) without any clear headway.

The challenge with impunity is that it emboldens perpetrators and nurtures a culture of self-censorship among victims. It also creates doubts about the state's commitment to serve justice to crime victims. The latter is detrimental to the justice system in the country. Government must, therefore, act to ensure that perpetrators are duly punished so the public will not lose confidence in the justice system.

One of the biggest challenges to fighting impunity is the fact that attacks against journalists, media workers and members of the general public are often perpetrated by state security agents who are entrusted with the safety and security of individuals. That is to say, if you are assaulted by a police and you report it to another police or a police station, how far can one expect that case to travel? It is not clear how fair and objective the police will be in investigating itself as rightly noted by the Editorial of the March 20, 2019 edition of the Ghanaian Times newspaper (page 4) and the publication on “Violation of natural justice if police investigates themselves” on page 12 of the same paper.

This assault case comes as another test case for the GPS to prove itself. The assault on the GT3 must not be added to the [list of impunity cases](#) pending investigation, prosecution, compensation or any other remedy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although Ghana is ranked free in terms of press freedom and freedom of expression, attacks against journalists and media workers go on unabated. Although 2019 is only three months old, the country has already recorded the killing of Ahmed Suale, physical attacks against Nkoranza-based [Dero FM](#), Accra-based [Radio XYZ](#) and the GT3. Investigative journalist, Manasseh Azure Awuni has also been [threatened](#).

Unfortunately, almost all the cases remain unresolved, a challenge that is nurturing a culture of impunity in the country. The relatively wide publication of the attack against the GT3 has helped in getting three police officers interdicted. Unfortunately, media publications on the assault of the GT3 is waning and this may result in less interest in the case and ultimately compromise the pace of investigations, if it is pursued at all.

The assault against the GT3 has also highlighted a number of issues that need attention to safeguard the safety of journalists, media workers and the public at large. The recommendations below are, thus, made to help improve the situation.

Media

- Media managers must commit to using all legal means to ensure justice for media persons whose rights are violated in the line of duty.
- The various media houses and individual journalists who pledge to support this case to its logical end should walk the talk.
- The media should constantly report on the progress of the case to let the GPS and government know that the case is being monitored.
- Journalists and media workers should always make it a point to report attacks to the police and file their statements accordingly. Media managers

and owners must denounce and report violations against media organisations and journalists.

Ghana Police Service

- Heed to calls made by CHRAJ, the MFWA, GJA and others and thoroughly investigate the assault case and prosecute the offending officers and “not put them through Administrative Service Disciplinary Enquiry to serve as deterrent to others and to reassure Ghanaians that police officers are not above the law.”
- Expedite investigations into the assault case.
- Train security agents to appreciate and respect the work of the media.

Government must

- Ensure that justice is served to the victims of the assault.
- Ensure that security agents stop assaulting journalists and media workers.
- Ensure that security agents who abuse journalists and media workers are duly punished.



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