Project: Promoting Professional Standards & Enhancing the Watchdog Role of the Ghanaian Media

Media Ethics Monitoring Instrument

Introduction

The media exist to serve the public – society. The preamble of the GJA Code of Ethics states, accordingly, that: "The public expects the media to play their watchdog role. They should do this with a high sense of responsibility without infringing on the rights of individuals and society in general."

It follows that just as the media claim the right – and are charged with the responsibility – to demand accountability from public officeholders, the public also claim the right to seek accountability from the media (the watchdog role). The Code of Ethics serves as the guide for media to observe and manifest professional accountability. For the public, the Code serves as the standard to gauge media accountability.

The Ethical principles are a universal value system. The ethical principles and standards set in a code, stand above, and apply to all media regardless of their diversity in terms of ownership, type (print, broadcast or online), their differing, competing or even contrary social, political or ideological missions and orientations. It does not, for example, matter whether the media serve particular political partisan, sectarian, sectional or other interests in society. As they operate in the public space, they ought to conform to these Ethical principles which are, according to the GJA Code: "meant to ensure that members [of the media profession] adhere to the highest ethical standards, professional competence and good behaviour in carrying out their duties."

The Project

This component of the project seeks to monitor to what extent, on a day-to-day basis, the Ghanaian media observe the Ethical principles, norms, values and standards of the journalism profession. In practice, the test is to establish the extent to which the media observe or violate the prescriptions laid down in the Ghana Journalists Association Code of Ethics.

In all, 26 media organisations made up of 10 radio stations, 10 newspapers and six (6) news websites will be monitored. Monthly reports will be produced and discussed by experts to help highlight incidents of violations and recommend ways of avoiding such infractions. The objective for this component of the project is to help promote professional standards among the target media in particular and the Ghanaian media in general.

The selected 26 media organisations cut across public, private, community and campus radio stations. The selection of the media organisations was also influenced by listenership levels, partisan orientation and language of broadcast.

Purpose of this Guide

The guide below serves as a Glossary of Definitions of the basic principles of ethics to be monitored. It is designed to assist and guide the Monitor in understanding properly and identifying accurately, any violations of particular Ethical principles by the media.

The list here is not exhaustive. It does not include all the possible Ethical principles applicable to the profession. This is because many of the principles are not easily or immediately verifiable from the output of the media. These include those principles that apply to the processes and methods of production of media content which can only be tracked and dealt with in the newsrooms, in the field and during the process of production. In other words, the list does not cover monitoring of the behavior or conduct of media professionals as they go about their work of gathering and processing news, information and other materials for publication or broadcast – activities which are generally outside the purview of the public. This exercise, therefore, is limited to monitoring the content of media as published/broadcast to the public.

MONITORING GUIDE

The Media Type and (respective) Content Category to Monitor

1. *Newspapers*
   a) News
   b) Features
   c) Columns
   d) Opinions /Letters to the Editor
   e) Editorials
   f) Headlines
   g) Pictures/Illustrations
   h) Cartoons

2. *News Websites (Online)*
   a. News
   b. Features
   c. Opinions
   d. Headlines
   e. Pictures /Illustrations
   f. Cartoons
   g. Readers' Comments

3. *Radio Stations*
   a) News

b) Talk Shows and Panel Discussions
c) Call-in Segments
d) Documentaries
e) Advertisements

Category and Definition of Ethical Principles to Monitor

With the exception of those items marked by [P or O], which apply to newspapers and online news websites, all other categories can be used to monitor all media, print, online or radio.

1. *Accuracy:* are the facts, the information, or assertion made or published verifiable, proven or truthful? This refers to the substance of statements, allegations, figures (quantities), or any claims made by any individual, institution or organization and published as such by the media.

2. *Fairness:* Does the News, Feature or Information provided give due recognition to the positions, views, actions, perspectives, attitudes or concerns of all the actors and subjects mentioned or referred to in the story?

3. *Balance:* Does the News story, Feature or Documentary give all sides in the story fair representation? Is the story comprehensive and not one-sided?

4. *Impartiality:* Does the News, Information or Presentation present only the side of one section? Does it project only one side in positive or favourable light while putting the other side in unfavourable light? Is the panel in a discussion programme representative of the different positions or viewpoints according to the subject of discussion? Is it biased in favour of one side and or against one side?

5. *Facts and Opinions:* Are facts separated from opinions in news presentations, LPMs or paid-for advertisements?

6. *Headlines:* Do the headlines and the content of story substance match; or do the content of stories differ from the message of the headline? Do the headlines mislead the public? Do the headlines have misleading accompanying pictures? **[P, O]**

7. *Decency:* Is the language, expression or picture used obscene? Does the language or expression vulgar or does it involve expletives? Is the language, expression or picture likely to attract public disapproval?

8. *Offensive to Good Taste and Public Sensibilities:* (This may refer to written or spoken words; or pictures, photographs and images) Is the language or expression used likely to provoke public displeasure? Is the language or expression, or the picture, photograph or

image used, such that they can elicit public disgust or feeling of outrage, or seen as an assault on the public's feelings, or as an attack on the emotions of the public?

9. ***Respect of Privacy:*** Does the news, information, discussion or other material make reference to the strictly personal or private concerns of a subject or person that is outside of the public interest.

10. ***Protection of Minors:*** Are minors unduly exposed to public scrutiny, ridicule or stigmatization? Are the identities of minors who are perpetrators of crimes or misdemeanors identified to the public? Are the identities or images of minors who are victims of sexual crimes exposed? Has the media house sufficiently protected the identity of the minor? Was consent sought from parents or guardians of the child before being interviewed? Was any leading information on the identity of the child given?

11. ***Protection of Victims of Sexual Crimes:*** Are the identities of victims of sexual crimes – rape, defilement or other – exposed?

12. ***Sensitivity to Persons in Grief or Distress:*** How are victims, or relatives of victims, of accidents, robbery, murder, disaster or other painful personal experiences treated? Is there excessive intrusion into the feelings of such persons?

13. ***Prejudice and Stereotyping:*** Are there expressions, statements or references, symbols and representations that imply or suggest prejudice or promote stereotyping of groups, communities or institutions or based on gender?

14. ***Photography, Pictures and Images:*** Do Photographs, Pictures and Illustrations show or portray in vivid ways images of violence, nudity, cruelty, pain, or gore? Do they offend traditional, religious, ethnic, medical or physical sensibilities? Are images of victims (of accidents, etc.), scenes of bodily injury, blood, personal loss and conditions of pain too detailed and or invoke pain and/or fear? Can they be shown to children without exciting fear or feelings of pain and revulsion? **[P, O]**

15. ***Public Interest value:*** Does the news story, feature, opinion, information, subject of discussion, programme or material being assessed in public interest?

For Online Comments only
Assessment of Gatekeeping Role of Editors: This is to be assessed by considering the kind of comments that are posted on the website, i.e. are the comments generally good, issues-driven or full of invectives and personality attacks? Overall, do you think the editor (the host of the radio programme) is moderating the comments section of the website (call-in segment) well by way of the kind of comments that are allowed to be posted on the site (to be aired on radio)? This is to be measured by indicating whether the moderation of the content on the comments section (call-in segment) is

i. Good (more than 60% of comments are issue-specific; devoid of intemperate language, wholesome for public consumption)
ii. Average (almost same percentage of civil and indecent language/expressions are posted, number of issues-based comments and personality attacks are about same)
iii. Poor (Less than 50% of the comments are issues-based. Majority of the comments focus on personality attacks and use of intemperate language)