

The Performance of the Media

The observance of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2021, had as its theme, 'Information as a Public Good.' According to the United Nations General Assembly, the purpose of observing the day each year, is to serve as a reminder to governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom and to be a time for reflection amongst media professionals about issues of press freedom and professional ethics. Beyond this, it is heralded as an opportunity to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom, assess the state of press freedom throughout the world, defend the media from attacks on their independence and pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty. These are lofty and noble ideals which cannot be faulted.

From a labour perspective, there is strong support for the freedom of the media to operate in a world that is said to be opened to transparency, as this embraces the ideals of transparency and accountability. Any deviation from these standards can cause the freedom of the press and associated professional ethics to be compromised. This is far from what trade unions would come to expect and accept from those in the media profession, but it quite understandable that the system is likely to be corrupted by the piper who calls the tune.

Media workers like any other workers, are expected to perform their duties in accordance with the standards and dictates of the profession. It would be unfair to suggest that media workers in the discharge of their duties, do less than strive to maintain high levels of professionalism. It may be that some may fall short as they bow to pressures which are exerted upon them from both internal and external sources.

In the interest of meeting the high standards expected of them, media workers should be careful not to present distorted, incomplete, inaccurate, bias and unbalanced information when reporting. To do otherwise would be a disservice to the public which demands that it is given accurate and reliable information. Media practitioners as the consummate professionals, would be the first to admit that

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'Information as a Public Good, 'emerges from a practice where there is a recognition of the importance of having verified and reliable information for dissemination to the public.

There is the responsibility of media professionals to reflect on their professional standards and ethics and to concern themselves with how best they can collectively work to address the suppression of press freedom. The latter may prove to be an uphill task, but where media workers conjoined to exercise their right to be unionized, this can invariably make a difference to their approach in getting their employers to clean up their act. Media workers ought to recognize that they are a unique group of professionals whose skills are not always easily and readily accessible. If the media is to perform at the level which is expected and to serve the best interest of the public, then there is an urgent need for a clean campaign to be initiated.

For example, attention may be placed on the idea of being the first to get a 'scoop', which is about being the first to cash in on a breaking story, that can sometimes be unconfirmed, unsubstantiated and inaccurate. The reality is that in many cases, it is a story which comes from the news room floor and as such, falls short of meeting media standards and is in breach of the ethics of the profession. Such stories can sometimes be misleading erroneous, offensive, malicious and destructive.

The standards for media professionals require that there is respect for freedom of expression, which is said to be the basic element of public order of a democratic society. The possession of good writing, communication and research skills are fundamental to the practice. When it comes to ethics of the practice, this commences with the gaining of public trust, where truthfulness, honesty and integrity are supported by fairness, balance, accountability, transparency and independence of thought. The public can do without sensationalism, emotive discharges and biases that create nothing more than what can be best described as noise in the circuit. The public can therefore benefit from a commitment on the part of media professionals to improve on their practice, rather than attempting to boast their individual personality.

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In moving to ensure that information remains a public good, there is a need for the media profession to give fair treatment to information shared by national and civil society organizations with the media houses for public dissemination. It can't be fair that press releases or press statements from some organizations are not carried or as is often the case, condensed into a mere paragraph. Very often the substance of the message is lost as the story is edited and sometimes given a misleading headline. The flip side to this is that the stories of politicians and other prominent members of society, are given full and extensive coverage; irrespective of the substance of the individual story. This brings into question the issue of the fairness of treatment.

Although the focus of World Press Freedom Day centres on 'Information as a Public Good,' there must be the recognition that for this to happen and be maintained, a commitment ought to be made to **strengthen the safety culture for media workers and for improving their conditions of work.**