
CORRUPTION IN THE MEDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICAL AND SOCIALY RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Corruption is an important problem affecting every strata of the Nigerian society. Its impact on Nigerian media is no exemption. Corruption concerning media is popularly tied to the brown envelope which ultimately affects journalist sense of news judgment. Hence, this paper took a conceptual approach to examine the relationship between the issue of brown envelope syndrome and unethical practice within the Nigerian media system and its implications on ethical and socially responsible journalism. Surprisingly, the result of the literature reviewed revealed that poor journalistic training and lack of professionalism is responsible for unethical practice in Nigerian media. It further revealed the loss of credibility, loss of watchdog roles and decline in news quality, values and public trust of journalists as its implications on ethical and socially responsible journalism. This paper recommends among others, that sound education in form of regular seminars, workshops and professional training be given to would-be journalists where the legal framework and media regulatory bodies served their responsibilities by regularly checkmating the excesses of journalists to confirm strict adherence to ethical codes.

Keywords: *media corruption, brown envelope syndrome, ethical journalism, socially responsible media, social responsibility theory, deontological theory*

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is an important social menace affecting every strata of the Nigerian society (Ahmed, Abdulbaqi & Adisa, 2019). The menace according to Olukotun (2018) has pervaded the affairs of Nigerian journalism since her return to the civilian in 1999. However, corruption as a social menace affects all facet of life. It spread quickly across strata. It is like an HIV/AIDS which when contacted through corrupted mind affects the system of an innocent soul. As such, corruption affects young and old, poor and the rich, academics and non-academics, students and lecturers, parents and children and the entire society at large where journalists are no exemption since they constitute members of the society having feelings and needs to cater for. Arguably, journalists can be immune to corruption because like other human beings, journalists shared similar corruptive tendencies, and with this, they are bound to be wanted in the way they collect, process and disseminate news. Conversely, if journalism has a glue of corruption, then, it becomes apparent that the news we receive from the media is a product of manufactured consent. For instance, a situation where news presentation is not driven by public interest but influenced by freebies stands against journalistic professional ethics. It is, according to Udomisor and Kenneth (2013), anti-public unity and development which consequently breached journalistic ethical codes. Thus, exposing corruption and unethical practices in the government services is of no value if media men are themselves involved in collecting material gratifications for news dissemination. This kind of gratification that is manifested in journalism practice is a syndrome that is universally called “brown enveloping”.

“Brown envelope” in the words of Oshunkeye (2011) has become a culture, so much that when journalists go on assignments, they already have it at the back of their mind that they should be given ‘something’. The people giving the envelopes call it ‘just a little appreciation’. Others call it a token ‘for your transport’ or ‘for fuel’, especially if the journalist came to the assignment in his car. Yet, the receivers know that nothing goes for free in this country. They know very well that those offering ‘brown envelopes’ do not do so because of their undying love for journalists or journalism. They do so to achieve what Oshunkeye (2011) called a preconceived end.

Corruption is a significant problem affecting the practice of journalism in Nigerian environment. Many scholars (Brayton, 2008; Danladi, 2008; Pate, 2007; Okoye, 2007; Oso, & Pate, 2011; Skjerdal, 2010; Olukotun, 2018; Zaggi, 2007) of ethics and responsibility in the media have termed media corruption to brown envelope journalism. For instance, Olukotun (2018) identified that corruption in form of the brown envelope has suffused the affairs of Nigerian journalism since her return to the civilian in 1999. It is linked to much irresponsible journalism, professional indiscipline and misconducts found in our media today. Thus, all sorts of ethical issues which surfaced in Nigerian media today include materialism, bribery, fraud, sycophancy, and all forms of professional misconducts.

This development is clearly against the social responsibility theory of journalism. The concept of social responsibility in the terrain of mass media conferred that they (the mass media) must act as the conscience of the nation by revealing bad things, commending good ones and keeping the interest of the citizenry uppermost in their agenda. Thus, of all the ethical problems found in media industries, the issue of materialism, which is manifested in the form of bribery and acceptance of gifts popularly called “brown envelope”, is endemic and therefore demands scholarly attention to call the situation to order. Therefore, there is a need to point from theoretical perspective, the responsibility of the media, the implications

of corrupted media on ethical journalism and recommendation to the problem as this serves as background for the objective of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brown enveloping is a serious and contestable issue in the Nigeria media landscape. It penetrates more to the heart of news gathering and dissemination function of journalism and consequently erodes the ethics on which the profession is founded. The operation of the media which is characterized by ethics plays significant roles in the journalists' sense of news judgment. To better understand the concepts "ethics", "responsibility" and "brown envelope", it is imperative to question the meaning from scholarly perspectives and established their relationship in the Nigeria journalism practice. Thus, it is widely agreed among philosophers that ethics is synonymous with morality which suggest actions in human conduct and behaviour. Ethics, according to Frankena and Granrose (1974) cited in Semiu, Adejola and Folarin (2012) concern the problems of morality and immorality resulting from philosophical thinking. Ethics as moral philosophy further illustrate the knowledge of good or bad conduct in society, using societal norms for its evaluation in each society (Okunna, 2003).

In the view of Omole (2000) ethics, as cited by Okunna (2003) re-echoed in Semiu et al, (2012) is seen as "the shared normative values, which any society holds dear and are used to judge the behaviour or performance of any member of a society" (p.5). To be a good ambassador of society, ethics provides the minimum acceptable behaviour which members must attain. Similarly, ethics is conceptualized as "the study of formation of moral values and principles of right and wrong" (Altschull, 1990 cited in Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.95).

In the words of Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012), ethics is "an integral part of human existence that is primarily concerned with the personal duties of an individual to himself and to others" (p.516). Similarly, ethics is a product of normative science of conduct particularly about what is considered acceptable in a given space (Noun, 2008). With reference to journalism particularly in a complex societal arrangement, ethics regulate the behaviour of journalists and guard them against the abuses of their power as gatekeepers and watchdogs of issues. Therefore, a core constituent of socially responsible journalism is ethical journalism. Thus, predetermines responsible journalism is media ethics. In the NUJ Code of Ethics, Oshunkeye (2011) found that clause 4 of the code says: A journalist shall not accept bribes nor shall he/she allow other inducements to influence the performance of his/her professional duties.

In view of the above, we can safely argue that the bedrock of journalism is publication of the truth. This is in line with Shoemaker and Reese (1996), Okoye (2007) and Pate (2007) who observed that journalism ethics starts with the principle of "truth" in reporting which consequently embrace impartiality, objectivity, balancing, accuracy, fairness and more importantly respect for privacy. Journalists on their parts have the responsibility in maintaining professional ethics in reporting the truth whom the society hopes accurate, objective and unbiased reporting. Corroborating this, Ngwodo (2008) in Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) prophesied that the truth can only surface in media texts if utmost commitments are made to entrenched ethical codes in the business of news gathering and dissemination function of mass communication. In view of the popular belief that journalism is the fourth pillar in a democratic environment, it plays a pivotal role in informing citizens

about the activities of those in power and punishes offenders of power by raising awareness through monitoring and investigative function of journalism.

There is a broad consensus that accountable, responsible, ethical and socially responsible journalism could be made possible through the development of independent, legally protected, professionally managed, and economically viable news media (Transparency International, 2013). The best of journalism as it deals with collecting, analyzing, verifying and presenting news regarding current events, trends and issues (Hasan, 2013 cited in Udomisor & Udoh, 2015), is pre-occupied with ethics. Ethical journalism ensures reporting that is free from bias and emotional attachment, and the reporting that advocates the public interest which bridges the gap between government and the people and consequently set a forum that makes government accountable to the society. So, an ethical journalist serves the public interest, expose corrupt and incompetent public officials, and above all honest and just, courageous and clean, and while growing, have a conscience and good manner with the utmost aim of defending the interest of the public. In short, Nwodu (2006) and Udeze (2012) observed that the ethical code prescribes for journalists are; fairness and accuracy, avoidance of discrimination of any kind, maintaining decency, protect the confidentiality of sources, exhibiting a high level of responsibility in deciding what should be news and shunning the act of soliciting for or accepting a bribe and all forms of gratifications as a precondition for publishing information.

The serious aberrations and deviations from acceptable standards found in journalism practice today could be blamed on the complete freedom exercised by the press of the twentieth century (Eke, 2014). This negative journalistic practice is what Okunna, (1995) cited in Eke (2014) termed as abuse of freedom caused by a brown envelope which consequently resulted in yellow journalism, sensationalism and character assassination. This unethical trend as noted by Eke (2014) portrayed the brown envelope as a journalism convention rather than a condemnable act. Brown envelope according to Skjerdal (2011) is a concealed incentive given by an event organizer to journalist denoting a contribution towards transportation costs. In the words of Ristow, (2010), it is unnoticeable cash for news coverage'. In a similar investigation, Nkwocha (2004) cited in Eke (2014) conceptualized it as the "money given to reporters or editors to persuade them to write positive stories or kill a negative story..." (p. 68).

Similarly, Skjerdal (2010) offered an operational meaning of brown envelope as the "...journalistic activity which involves transfer of various types of rewards from sources to the reporter" (p.369). He did not stop there; he identified "three characteristics" that are commonly involved with brown envelope. "First, it occurs at a personal level; second, it involves a reasonable degree of confidentiality to succeed. And third, it is an informal contract. This presumes that there is a willing source who is ready to give 'something' to influence the processing of the information gathered by the reporter; and a reporter, willing or reluctant to take but who collects all the same for his/her personal use and the 'deal' is wrapped up in utmost confidentiality" (Skjerdal, 2010, p.369-370). The findings of Okoro and Chinwebo-Onuora (2013) re-affirmed that the ultimate of the brown envelope is to suppress the truth. This position corroborates Ristow (2010), Nkwocha, (2004, p.68) and Okunna (1995, p.57), cited in Eke (2014) that the syndrome means a monetized package given to an unethical journalist to air, shape or kill a story.

Meanwhile, Oshunkeye (2011), Ekerikevwe (2009) cited in Okoro and Chinwebo-Onuara (2013) corroborated that brown envelope is more specifically common in Nigerian journalism practice, while in some 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, Family support, Transport, Ghana Must Go, the boys are going, Last question, Last line", (p.7). And in many other ways, it is pronounced Press Release, Appreciation, Welfare, Freebies, among others. Because of this, whatever name it is called, our position is that the practice asphyxiates journalistic freedom in the exercise of professional judgment. This is logical because expected ethical standards is compromised especially in situation where journalists are sceptical of whether or not the brown envelope they receive have bearing on news judgment.

In this continuum, a reporter of *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia, in Hermawan (2006) cited in Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) readily gave instances where journalists are mostly unaware of when they have collected bribe thus: "even though the journalistic code of ethics clearly prohibits reporters from accepting bribes, they are still divided on what constitutes a bribe. A recent survey by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AIJ) shows that 85% of 400 journalists surveyed in 17 cities believed that accepting money from news sources was a form of bribery, but only 65% agreed that receiving valuable goods, such as cell phones and cameras was bribery. 33% of the respondents believed that having their travel expenses covered by a news source was a form of bribery, while 65% said it was not. 36% of journalists thought that hotel accommodation provided by news sources was bribery. Many of them have an erroneous perception of bribery..." (p. 516). Thus, whatever forms it takes, what is debatable is that journalists get pressurized by what the news source gives, which ultimately make journalists, become incapable of being a representative of a profession that advocates and uphold the principle of "truth" in news dissemination. Convincingly enough, a paid news is directly linked to a commercial service that must be written in favour of the identified source, and when this happened, journalism canons to which the profession is built suffers momentarily.

In the same vein, Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe, (2012) gave an instance of Rt. Reverend Abiodun Adetiloye, who submitted newsworthy views to the journalists on a cause of national importance "But the journalists felt they needed something more to write the news. They asked for "transport money" when the religious man declined; the journalists blacked out the entire interview" (p.517). Judging from the above unethical practices, Okunna (2003) in Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) concluded that meaningful contribution to national development could only be achieved by a disciplined press. Thus, the end of an undisciplined press might not be immediate however, members of an undisciplined press who markets lies, and who cannot stand right with the ethics of the profession will sooner or later be forgotten (Umejie, 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social responsibility theory of the press and deontology theory readily provide anchorage for this study. The social responsibility theory from the Propounders Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) originated as a result of laxity of responsibilities in libertarian press. It believes that freedom comes with perceived responsibilities. It advocates for responsible decent journalism in society. In a situation where the press was beginning to abuse the freedom the libertarian accorded it, the theory serves as a means of calling the press to order. In applying this theory, putting the writings of McQuail (2010) in perspective, a responsible media have a duty of objective reporting, accuracy, fairness and truthful in the news report

to the society. By this, it means certain journalistic standards must be entrenched in the news media. Responsible journalists are to serve the interest of the public rather than engaging in primordial selfish interest that unjustifiably portrays lack of plurality and diversity in media texts.

In this development, is in this view that Udomisor and Kenneth, (2013) added that a responsible media will reflect the plurality and diversity of trends in the society by giving access to various points of view and rights of reply while neglecting anything that could serve as hindrance to “truth” and “objective” reporting. Ojobor (2002) citing McQuail (1987) stated that social responsibility theory advocates that the responsibilities of the media should be guided by media regulation within the established framework of the law. Therefore, the direct tenet of the social responsibility theory which the brown envelope constitutes was the idea of self-regulation against ethical and social irresponsibility in journalism practice. Thus, what propels journalistic code of ethics that ultimately spelt out their responsibilities is the idea of self-regulation in the media. But the abuse of this code of ethics necessarily affects De-ontological underpinning.

Deontology theory on the other hand, as originated by a philosopher Immanuel Kant (1798) re-echoed in the work of Bruce (2005) argued however that, whether the consequences of certain action such as lying are beneficial or not, are intrinsically wrong. Kant believes that the universally accepted laws or ethics which are within one’s ability should resonate with peoples’ actions. He noted that certain set of principles and rules serve as guiding morally obligated human beings. So, the idea of conventional rules, laws or ethics in the society are always what pre-occupied the hearts of good men. Kant Deontological theory when applying to journalism recognizes that certain actions like brown envelope are unethical if it could distance journalists from telling the truth. The bearing of this theory upholds the application of the canons of journalism by the journalists in the course of collecting information from sources. First, that he, journalist, uphold that his actions are guided by the context of established ethics in the journalism profession. Thus, to fall short of the expected code of ethics in journalism is to accept gratification before reporting a story considered of great importance to the society.

In this continuum, Kant assumes that when a journalist rationalizes that the brown envelope he collects motivate and help suppresses harsh economic situation in the media environment and the poor remuneration offers in the journalism profession, this motivation, according to him, has no basis in deontological system and cannot equally be used as a basis for describing an action as morally correct if especially, the action kills the intended canons upon which the profession is established. So, the theory proposes that journalists must work within the ethics that guide their profession and as such must shun any act that might negate their sense of duties.

POOR REMUNERATION AND “BROWN ENVELOPE” SYNDROME IN NIGERIAN JOURNALISM

Brown envelope in Nigerian journalism has become so widely notice, acknowledged and concurred as a means to an end in journalism that one wonders if journalism could practically survive without it. This baffles when one thinks about the fact that the press which is supposed to perform a watchdog role in the society is yet not immune to corruption. In journalism, corruption is manifested from the acceptance of “brown envelope” (Brayton, 2008; Danladi,

2008; Pate, 2007; Okoye, 2007; Oso, & Pate, 2011; Skjerdal, 2010; Olukotun, 2018; Zaggi, 2007). Perhaps, to begin with, it is unquestionable to say journalist is a human being saddled with a lot of responsibilities, just like other humans, to provide basic and essential needs for his family. Thus, it is logical to say, however, if journalist is suffering the deprivation of the essential human needs to discharge his duty creditably well consequent upon poor remuneration, lack of professionalism and adequate training (Zaggi, 2007).

This essentially explains why journalistic misdemeanours such as immoral or unethical practices are the handiwork of many of our journalists. This further explains why many of our journalists serve as the manipulative agencies of politicians in the public and private media houses. Therefore, we must not forget as practitioners, scholars and students of journalism that we must have a healthy regard for the public interest and always observe the highest professional and ethical standards in order to gain and maintain public trust. However, it is unfortunate in the media industry to say the true practice of journalism (Semiu et al, 2012), is no more in existence, rather what is being practised is commercialized journalism or what is systematically termed as PR-journalism. This is why Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) regarded it as a new form of news commercialization.

In the same vein, Norris and Odugbemi (2010) noted that weak civil society, limitations in media literacy, lack of professional standards and public access to the media, poor remunerations and market failures constituted what could hinder the media in fulfilling its watchdog roles. They emphasized that poor salary levels of journalists are the usual suspect. The rationale goes to show that media workers are forced to engage in, and or grab whatever benefit comes their way in order to make ends meet. Skjerdal (2010) also go with the view that the brown envelope in journalism practice is aggravated by poor economic conditions offered by the media industry throughout the world. This, according to him, is tempting and is responsible for shady manners in journalism. Thus, it is dangerous in the practice of journalism when ethical explanation is seen and widely accepted as a product of ethical justification. This is similar to the conclusion of Skjerdal (2010) who posited that brown envelope may as well be accepted in the media because petty bribery has become widely acquiescent in the society.

Thus, those in support of the brown envelope posited that the collection of such is a function of the Nigeria socio-economic realities (Zaggi, 2007; Danladi, 2008; Brayton, 2008). Rationalizing the poor remuneration offered by the media outlets, coupled with the responsibilities of the media workers, they contend that the survival of the journalists would naturally rest on brown envelope. In a depressed economy like Nigeria, receiving brown envelope in their view enhances journalist survival. Similarly, it has also been argued by the advocates of brown envelope that it is culturally and altruistically good to be friendly and nice to invitees and visitors. To this school of thought, it is part of African culture to display an act of hospitality to invited journalists. However, to contending advocates, it is immoral, unethical and unacceptable in journalism practice to be offering and receiving brown packs because the concept could be tagged to bribery which has higher chances of influencing journalists' sense of news value. To this school of thought, the collection of brown packs is antiquated to ethical journalism such that it distorts "justice, vitiates media credibility and creates disequilibrium in the society" (Onyisi, 1996, p.24).

Affirming the above position, Pate (2007) noted that many of Nigerian media through their coverage of news and events often de-emphasize how to contribute to a culture of "truth", public right to know and interest due to their failure to abide by the canons of journalism

which emphasize fairness, objectivity, relevance, balance, honesty and thoroughness. Instead, the Nigerian press indulges in reporting that promote insecurity in the land, blackmailing and lack of truth resulting from the gratifications they receive from sources. This, according to Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012), is inimical to healthy journalism practice and professional honour and should urgently be avoided. Perhaps, the above concerns may not all be deliberate, but a manifestation of lack of professionalism and greediness of our media writers (Pate, 2007; Oso, & Pate, 2011). For example, it is not uncommon to see sensationalized stories, unethically written and unfairly delivered pieces that disgustingly showcase lack of professionalism and training on the concept of objectivity, truth, fairness and pluralism in media content. Journalists who perpetrate such lose professional honour and continuous patronage to their audience.

“Brown Envelope” and Nigerian Journalism Practice: The Implications

Ethics and professionalism get punished (Oshunkeye, 2014), in journalism profession especially when media writers participate in what Adeyemi and Okorie (2009) called “cheque book journalism or imbibe in the culture of collecting brown envelope. Thus, it should not come as a surprise to hear that sources paid journalist for news coverage in Africa. The widespread existence of cash for news coverage in media environment is an indication of its prevalence on the continent. “Cocktail journalism” Akinfeleye (2007), “Bonus journalism” Frère (2001, p.62), “Oiling hands” Kasoma (2000, p.96) are instances of what the practice is euphemistically called across the African continent (Lodamo & Skjerdal, 2009). In answering the implicative tendencies of brown envelope in Nigerian journalism, let us quickly reflect on this from the perspective of mass communication students, first journalism is a profession of trust that any corrosive trend that could damage the trust must not be entertained but in recent times, the crippling effects of derailed journalism such as a decline in news objectivity, news value, public morality and news quality have been blamed on brown envelope resulting from lack professionalism and trainings in media industries (Pate, 2007; Oso, & Pate, 2011; Oshunkeye, 2014; Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe, 2012).

Consequently, suspicious and continuous distrust is what media consumers regard journalism. The way journalist trade news for cash is always subject to concerns for media consumers which always propel the question of integrity and credibility of news media concerning topical issues in Nigerian society. As such, media consumers make no difference between politicians and journalists as many of them are not reliable, trustworthy, reputable and honest through the various manipulative ways they handle news rather giving the fact of the case. For instance, people react with disdain, laughter when told journalism is built and practised upon truth-telling or founded on the ethical principle of truth and objective journalism (Semiu, et al 2012).

The above might not be unconnected to the submission of Baldwin (2008) that the ethical implications are conditioned upon the actions of the journalists. This is because of the action or inaction of the journalists with regards to news writing and dissemination influence peoples perceptions. This influence can be good or bad. However, when the media act irresponsibly, several things according to Baldwin (2008), Fakoya (2010), Oshunkeye (2011), Skjerdal (2011), Semiu et al (2012), Salihu (2017), Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) and Okoro & Chinweobo-onuoha (2013) Pate (2007), Oso, and Pate (2011) happened:

- Unnecessary harm is done to people

- The media loses credibility; promotes lack of trust for the journalists
- It weakens the media's vital role as watchdogs
- The well-being of democracy suffers
- There is loss of credible, factual, balanced and objective news
- Journalism practice in Nigeria get weakens
- The press may not be able to blow the whistle on wrongdoings.
- Image of the Nigeria Journalists suffers
- Promotes Manipulate, subjective and biased media coverage
- Distance journalists from being independent reporters
- Promotes unethical and unreliable media reportage

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A critical examination of literatures with regards to the contents of our media as they relate to news manipulation revealed an increasing negligence of professional traits of decent and responsible journalism. Stated differently, throughout the country however, a lot of dishonesty and indecency in news reporting has permeated the affairs of journalism. There is therefore the need for Nigerian journalists to be rigorously trained on the job on the heart of objective news reporting. Therefore, lack of professional trainings for most journalists has been identified as the prerequisite to the much of bad journalism registered in Africa today and Nigeria in particular. A factor which, according to Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012), Okoro and Chinweobe-onuaha (2013), Eke (2014) and Semiu et al (2012) has affected the strength of the messenger, the nature of the message and how it is received and has made prestige, quality and credibility to crumpled. Scholars like Okoro and Chinweobe-onuoha (2013), Pate (2007), Salihu (2017), Semiu et al, (2012), Fakoya (2009) and Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2012) are of the view, however, among the concerns of Nigerian journalism like poor remuneration, greed, lack of professionalism and poor journalistic training, lack of self-worth, character assassination and invasion of privacy, that; lack of professionalism and poor journalistic training are responsible for media corruption that is ultimately known as brown envelope. This study summarized the implication of brown envelope on ethical and socially responsible journalism as crucifixion of journalists' professional sense of duty with perpetual consequent in news commercialization.

Thus, in journalism practice, media corruption could be resolve by raising the awareness of ethical standards, ensuring media-independent, enforcing ethical media policies and providing regular media trainings for the effective investigative function of journalism. Also, the glory and rightful place of journalism must be reshaped in the minds of the public. To achieve this, journalists must be trained regularly and re-trained in the area of professionalism and ethics to discharge theirs as a societal watchdog. Equally important is the fact that there should be an improved pay package for journalists. It is only when journalists are well paid that they would be motivated to be morally and ethically just. Media owners should be encouraged not to sacrifice public affairs for undue advantage. They must be made to know that the public property (electromagnetic waves) which they are using belong to the public. And finally, the media regulatory agencies should enforce codes that will compel all media houses to embrace the professional canons of journalism in the interest of unity and development of the country through either sanctioning or by fine when noticed that programmes and texts are being commercialized resulting from brown envelope collection.

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