

Narrating the Nigeria Story: The Challenge for Journalism

By Dr. Olatunji Dare

I count it a great honour to have been judged worthy of presenting this Lecture to mark the 75th birthday anniversary of our illustrious and most distinguished compatriot, Professor Wole Soyinka.

He has been such a constant presence in our national life and our consciousness that we hardly noticed the passage of time in a life so rich in interest and incident. It seems only a few years ago that he was so startled by the appearance of his first grey hairs that he composed a poem to mark the event.

Devoting this Lecture to journalism rather than not literature and the arts in which Soyinka has attained global renown is not as aberrant as it may seem at first blush. We journalists also claim him as one of our own.

At the time the Nobel Prize for Literature was announced in 1986, Soyinka was writing a fortnightly column for the weekly newsmagazine, African Guardian, in which he examined engagingly and often humorously the human condition. Editors and staffers immediately went into a lively debate about how the epochal achievement should be reported.

Obviously, the Nobel Prize's affiliation with struggling magazine would have to be advertised, for it just might be the elixir that would not only propel it past its domestic competitors but catapult it to global reckoning. Several headlines were suggested, but the one that had the most appeal was "African Guardian Columnist Wins Nobel Prize for Literature."

Soyinka, as he often seems to prefer, had no institutional affiliation at the time, and no fixed address. So, identifying him with The African Guardian seemed not wholly unreasonable, even if it was a bit of a stretch.

In that giddy atmosphere, some were still sober enough to counsel that Soyinka's fortnightly contribution to the magazine, procured through the good services of the ever dynamic Dr Yemi Ogunbiyi, then a senior executive with Guardian Newspapers, was a tangential affiliation at best, and that to define him in those terms would amount to a stultification of the Nobel.

The sober ones won the day.

But if claiming Soyinka as one of our own in the profession of journalism seems self-aggrandizing, consider the first half of the title of this Lecture: "Telling the Nigerian Story."

No person has told the Nigerian story more eloquently, more copiously, and more arrestingly than Wole Soyinka. He has told that story in poetry, drama, film, music, fiction, memoir, criticism, essays, lectures, radio, and of course in direct, militant action on the street, and most memorably, in a radio station.

He was only 26 years old when, on the eve of Nigeria's independence, he wrote the dramatic work, *A Dance of the Forests*, in which he correctly anticipated the angst and the discontinuities that have bedeviled the Nigerian state to this day.

In a worthy cause, you could never have a stronger or more dependable ally than Soyinka. How often have many of us here, including the present speaker, enlisted his support in pursuing one objective or another, persuaded that his name and the authority that goes with it would make the decisive difference?

In an unworthy cause, you could never have a more formidable adversary. You can make every oblation, every supplication, but if Ogun has anything to do with the matter, that cause is doomed.

We all have heard, and perhaps in moments of frustration quoted with approval the statement, attributed to the Economist quoting an unidentified source, describing Nigeria as a land “where the worst never happens, but where the best is impossible.”

Bad things happen here frequently, but the best is no stranger to Nigeria. “June 12” happened. The MUSON Centre where we are gathered is a sparkling reality. His Excellency Habitude Fashola, Governor of Lagos State, will make a first-rate governor anywhere, without having to sign up for a crash programmed in public administration at Harvard. A great many of our compatriots present here and scattered all over the globe rank among the best anywhere in their fields.

And the man whose birthday anniversary we are celebrating today belongs among the very best writers who ever lived.

Thank you, sir, for the example you have set by your creativity, erudition, courage, and sustained engagement, of always speaking truth to power, and your unwavering commitment to justice and human freedom. I join all gathered here today and elsewhere to wish you very many happy returns of July 13.

The title of this Lecture, “Narrating the Nigerian Story: The Challenge of Journalism,” was chosen by its organizers, the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism. My broad task, as I see it, is to discuss how well the news media have acquitted themselves as chroniclers of the story of Nigeria, its triumphs, trials, tribulations and challenges.

But the press itself is part and parcel of the Nigerian story and inseparable from it. The chronicler is in itself a chronicle and part of a larger chronicle, with its own triumphs and trials and tribulations and challenges.

Over the next 45 minutes, I will try to sketch in outline these intertwined stories and suggest how the news media can tell the story more effectively.

First, what is Nigeria?

Nigeria began as an idea in the head and mind of the British imperial agent Frederick Lugard. He actualized the idea in 1914. Since then, Nigeria has been a picture we carry in our heads.

Nigeria is a place on a map, located, it is often said with more than a hint of derision, in the armpit of Africa. I usually remind those who dwell on this point that we had no choice in the media

It is inhabited by a patchwork of ethnic nationalities corralled into place by British imperial fiat. Nobody knows its actual geographical boundaries. The World Court at The Hague. I gather, awarded Bakassi to

Cameroun largely on the evidence of official Nigerian maps which located the disputed territory unambiguously in Cameroun.

Just as nobody knows the actual geographical boundaries, nobody knows the actual population the nearest 25 million. Whatever the actual numbers, there is no disputing the fact that Nigeria is home to the largest number of black people in the world. The claim that every fifth person in Africa and every eighth black person in the world is a Nigerian has gone largely unchallenged.

The point that every fifth African is a Nigerian once caused a big family quarrel in Kenya, according to a story told me by a person of very high consequence. The man of the house wanted another a fifth child about his wife would hear none of it. He pleaded and pleaded, but his wife was unyielding. For good measure, she took every precaution not to conceive another child.

The woman was relatively young and in good health. The couple had the resources to provide for an addition to the family. So, why not another child?

Because, said the woman, she did not want to give birth to a Nigerian. She had no doubt heard all kinds of stories about Nigeria and Nigerians – the kinds of stories that should have moved the authorities to embark on a spirited re-branding campaign decades before the energetic Professor Dora Akunyili, came to the rescue as Minister of Information.

Nigeria, as I was saying, is a place on a map, with a population that nobody knows to the nearest 25 million with confidence, and with international boundaries that nobody knows for certain.

It is a work in progress – not yet quite a century old since its creation, and one year short of 50 as a sovereign state. As countries go, it is has not even reached adolescence.

And so, like all works in progress, Nigeria is a promise and a possibility. It exists in the present, but it is future country.

Nigeria is, finally, an ideal, an ideal formulated during a period when a great future seemed not only splendidly visible but eminently attainable. I will return to this ideal in the final section of this presentation

What is the story of Nigeria?

Briefly, it is s a story of false starts, clumsy runs, and abrupt endings, of censuses that were no censuses, elections that were no elections. It is the story of ethnic strife and civil war and religious conflict. It is the story of how to accomplish the difficult feat of running a gold mine – in this case, a sprawling oil industry – at a colossal loss.

It is a story rich with intimations of a Sisyphean tale, in which battles fought and won decades ago have to be fought all over again. It is the story of a deluded quest to build democracy without democrats, of corruption in places high and low. It is a story of waste and drift, of misdirected energies, lost opportunities, under-performance and under-achievement, despite a prodigal endowment of human and material resources.

It is the story a retreat from electric power to the hurricane lantern and the oil lamp as the primary source of illumination. It is a story of a land where public service is the surest route to wealth and privilege, where policy-making at the highest level is seen as a hardship that must be compensated lavishly.

It is the story of how, by means overt and covert, the Nigerian Federation was shorn of the core elements of federalism and the country turned into something between a centrally administered state and a quasi-federation. The festering insurgency in the Delta is just one of the more dramatic consequences of this distortion.

But the Nigerian story is also a story of post-war healing and reconciliation in manner that drew praise around the world. It is a story of astonishing resilience, of equanimity in the face of crippling deprivations, shuffling and smiling as the legendary Afrobeat king Fela Anikulapo-Kuti phrased it, a story of hope and faith in the possibility of a better tomorrow. It is the story of a people gifted with extraordinary inventiveness. It is the story of a land and a people marked for greatness if only they would put first things first.

And what is the story of the Nigerian press?

In a strict sense, one cannot talk about the “Nigerian press.” It is not a monolith. Like Nigeria itself, it is an amalgam. Even in its earliest phase, it spanned the political spectrum from the downright conservative, such as Kitoye Ajasa’s Nigerian Pioneer, to the unapologetically radical, like Herbert Macaulay’s Lagos Daily News, with progressive newspapers like the Weekly Record of John Payne Jackson and the Daily Record of his son Horatio Jackson in between.

The story goes back 150 years ago, to 1859, when a missionary of the Anglican Church, the Rev. Henry Townsend, established Iwe Irohin in Abeokuta – the same year the first secondary school, the CMS Grammar School, was established in Lagos. (Congratulations to the Old Grammarians in our midst.)

It is the story of an institution with a “glorious ancestry,” according to Obafemi Awolowo, one of the elders of the fraternity of the pen. It is the story of an institution whose exertions, according to Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, the greatest journalist of his time, were “identical with the material and intellectual development of Nigeria.”

It is the story of what the historian Fred Omu has called, in its early phase, “the most distinguished intellectual forum in Nigeria’s intellectual history,” one in which “the high standard of debate cannot fail to fascinate the modern reader.”

It is the story of a marriage between press and politics in a single-minded pursuit of self-government from colonial rule and the assertion of black dignity; the story of fragmentation along party and regional lines in the run-up to independence, of descent into partisanship in its rawest form after independence, a partisanship that must be accounted a factor in the failed attempts to establish democracy on a firm footing in Nigeria, despite a quantum leap in quality and sophistication of the press that began in 1983 and has continued apace since then. The story of the press is a story of persecution and perseverance. Persecution took many forms, including the following:

Prosecution and imprisonment of journalists on sedition charges – sedition being any the colonial authorities, and later the authorities of independent Nigeria found disagree

Closure of newspapers, often without an enabling law.

Flogging, of a journalist who ruined a military governor's birthday by reporting a strike by teachers demanding payment of their salaries, and for good measure, shaving his head with broken glass.

Beating, by aides of a military governor, of a television reporter on duty –a beating so severe that the reporter's leg had to be amputated. But not before gangrene had set in. The Man Died – the man who inspired the title of the prison memoir of the man we are honouring today.

Laws demanding greater reportorial accuracy than is feasible even in the physical sciences, and under which journalists were jailed for publishing a story that was only 99 percent accurate;

Seizing the wives of journalists on the calculation that if they were held long enough, their husbands being sought by agents of national security would give themselves up. It did not matter whether, as in once case, the wife was eight months pregnant or, in the other case, that she was plucked from her infant children in the dead of night and the children left to fend for themselves.

Murder by parcel-bomb, with threats of more of the same if the media did not stop asking: Who killed Dele Giwa? To which we should add: Who killed Bagauda Kaltho?

Jailing journalists for life on false charges of being “accessories” to a phantom coup plot.

Forcing journalists to choose between being shot on sight and exile.

Impounding the entire print run of newspapers or magazines as they rolled off the presses, or intercepting their distribution vans on the highway, the object being to prevent the publications from being read;

Occupying the premises of newspapers to prevent them from publishing, and, for good measure, keeping the homes of editors under surveillance with a view to seizing them if they ventured thither;

Torching newspaper printing plants;

Abducting journalists.

The press survived these ordeals through sheer perseverance. It resorted to satire Cartoons blossomed. I recall a cartoon that supplied 53 synonyms for a suitcase.

It took to what the political scientist V. O. Key called “Afganistanism,” the habit of talking candidly about remote places while avoiding the dire reality at home. But in the Nigerian adaptation of Afghanistanism, it was always clear that the remote places reviewed and analyzed forthrightly were metaphors for the situation at home.

Sections of the press perfected the art of guerrilla journalism to evade censorship and suppression.

When their offices and homes were turned into “no-go” areas, they resorted to carrying out every aspect of their craft on the fly – from story assignment to distribution of the editorial product

The risks were daunting. Yet, they never missed a single issue.

The story of the press is also the story of indigenous enterprise. It was perhaps the first indigenously-owned industry in Nigeria, and although the attrition rate is high, the rate of survival is remarkable. Although the character of the Nigerian Tribune has changed over the years, how many business organizations can lay claim to 60 years of unbroken existence?

Paradoxically, it was during its greatest period of repression 1984-93, that the press underwent the greatest expansion in its history. The ranks of the independent press, of which *The Punch* was the sole exemplar, swelled with the entry into market of such titles as *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *Champion*, *Trust*, *ThisDay*, *Newswatch*, *TheNEWS*, and *Tell*, and *Trust*.

As the ranks of the independent press swelled, the ranks as well as the influence of government-owned newspapers shrank. Many of them expired altogether. A few survived, but only as pale shadows of what they once were, bereft of serious influence and prestige and authority.

A similar revolution took place in the electronic media. The official television and radio networks and its affiliates in the states had become so brazen in their partisanship that the public lost faith in their credibility and tuned off in large numbers.

Following the introduction of private broadcasting in the 1990s, electronic media outlets have grown rapidly. Though lacking the wide reach of the official network, these outlets are run with for the most part with the professionalism that the official media never fully embraced

How faithfully has the Nigerian press narrated the Nigerian story?

In the period stretching from the 1890s to the late 1940s, the press served as a militant nationalist vehicle for mobilization against colonial rule, asserting the validity of the indigenous cultures, speaking for the most part with one voice against what it regarded as a common adversary. It played watchdog, kept the colonial authorities on the defensive, and drove the public policy agenda.

It is no coincidence that those who led the nationalist awakening in Nigeria – Herbert Macaulay, Ernest Sessei Ikoli, John Payne Jackson and his son Horatio, H.O. Davies, Obafemi Awolowo, Anthony Enahoro, Dutse Ali Mohammed, and the most famous of them all, Nnamdi Azikiwe – were all professional or vocational journalists, editors, and newspaper publishers.

The motto of Azikiwe's *West African Pilot*, unquestionably the most influential newspaper of the period, encapsulated the overarching goal of the press: "Show the light, and the people will find the way."

Self-government was the goal, and the press kept it splendidly in focus. Self rule did not necessarily mean beneficent rule, however. For as the *Daily Service*, the organ of the Nigerian Youth Movement asserted in an editorial. self-government carried with it the right of the natives to "misrule" themselves if they so desired. An influential paper of the period, probably the *West African Pilot*, has been cited as declaring in an editorial, "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven."

The carving of Nigeria into three regions in 1951 marked the regionalization of nationalism. The nationalist movement became formally structured in political parties, functioning within an electoral system.

Each regional government set up its own newspaper, ostensibly to publicize its activities and mobilize the people for development. In reality, the newspapers were organs of the ruling party financed by the public. These newspapers rarely made the vital distinction between the ruling party and the government.

And so, whereas in the early colonial period the press put the authorities on the defensive, served as a watchdog and helped the public policy agenda, the press after internal self-government became mouthpieces of the regional government, or the ruling party in a region, or the opposition party.

The watchdog role was carried out only to the extent that the press in one region under the control of one political party criticized or vilified the government of competing regions and thereby the leadership of those political parties.

It was with this polarized press, polarized along political party lines, with the parties themselves divided roughly along ethnic lines, that Nigeria entered independent nationhood in 1960

Two disputed national population counts in 1963 and 1964, the political crisis in Western Nigeria, and the 1964 general elections generated great tension across the country, leading ultimately to the military coup of 1966 that toppled the government. On these crises the led to the coup, press performance, according to the historian Omu, was “a remarkable example of overzealousness and partisanship.”

What obtained in Nigeria’s First Republic, according to another scholar, Lars Holman, was an “instrumental” press that provided neither the “facts” nor the feedback essential for formulating sound public policy, but functioned to strengthen the grip of regional leaders over their followers and thereby the fragmentation of the country.

The contemporary statesman Chief Anthony Enahoro, the youngest person to occupy an editorial chair in Nigeria, a journalist of the radical school, and Federal Commissioner for Information in the military government of General Yakubu Gowon, was speaking from the pulpit of authority when, in 1968, he said, the press “lacked the vision to recognize danger and oppose wrong.”

He pronounced the press guilty of sycophancy, of “unquestioning deferential support for rulers, flamboyant praise for mediocrity, popularizing excess and impropriety,” and of “a craven desire to bat on any winning side.

These failings applied with even greater force to the press of the Second Republic, with government newspapers controlled by the ruling NPN and MKO Abiola’s National Concord on the one-hand, and on the other, opposition newspapers, most notably the Tribune, battled each other daily, demanding no quarter and yielding none.

Thirteen years of military rule (1966 – 1979) eroded the instrumental orientation of the Nigerian press somewhat, but with the return of party politics in 1978, that orientation resurfaced. Radio and television were complete government monopolies and owed total allegiance to the various governments and the ruling political parties in each state.

With the annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993, Nigeria faced perhaps its greatest test since the end of the civil war in 1970, and so did the press.

While some newspapers in the so-called Lagos-Ibadan axis led by The Guardian and

Punch – and naturally, Abiola’s Concord – stood robustly and courageously against the annulment, others equivocated, or lined up to voice and traction to the contrived fears and ancient hatreds that a suborned political class conjured up to defend and sustain it.

The New Nigerian declared in an editorial that the misbegotten Association for a Better Nigeria that was not even a party to the contest was the winner. Why?

Because, said the New Nigerian, the ABN’s fabled 20 million card-carrying members, far more numerous than those who had voted for each of the two official parties, had stayed away from the poll.

The Plateau State government-owned Standard hailed MKO Abiola’s election victory enthusiastically one day, only to soft-pedal the next day. The Champion praised Humphrey Nwosu for having conducted a transparent election but could not bring itself to accept and defend the outcome of that election. Well before the details of the Interim National Government designed to seal the annulment were spelled out, the Tribune welcomed the proposal.

Commitment to the best democratic practices, it turned out, was not one of the virtues of a substantial segment of the Nigerian press any more than it was one of the virtues of the military authorities.

To its credit, the press was a vital force in halting a scheme designed to enable a president remain in office beyond the two terms mandated by the Constitution. It remains an open question, however, whether the press helped kill the scheme because of its desire to preserve the Constitution, or because it disliked the person who stood to profit most from the scheme.

The 2007 general elections, certified by local and international observers as the most fraudulent they had ever witnessed, precipitated a crisis of legitimacy that lingers to this day. This crisis permeates many state capitals, as was brutally dramatized in last April’s partial re-rerun of the Ekiti gubernatorial election, and as is being dramatized in Bauchi, where a governor on the platform of the ANPP is not content to cross over to the PDP but insists on forcing his deputy to decamp too, failing which a suborned state legislature is set to impeach him.

Seven weeks ago, Nigeria celebrated 10 years of unbroken rule civil rule. In those ten years, not just the substance, but also the possibility of democracy, has been in retreat within the political parties, and in the larger polity. Elections have been little more than cruel travesties in which winners were turned into losers and losers into winners, with the connivance an electoral commission whose designation as an independent body is itself a cruel travesty.

And so, once again, Nigeria finds itself mired in a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis of leadership, both of which translate into a crisis of democracy.

All this has happened at a time when the level of professional sophistication of Nigerian journalists has never been higher, when, to paraphrase Chief Enahoro, the press has seldom boasted more able and readable writers who can hardly be accused of nursing a craven desire to bat on any winning side, or of lacking the courage to oppose wrong.

Yet, the press rarely speaks with a common voice or to common purpose.

What role should the press play at a time like this?

At a time when newspapers all over the world are struggling just to survive, when the continuing viability of the newspaper as a cultural form can no longer be taken for granted, this question may seem urgent. The Nigerian press has no immunity against the forces threatening newspapers globally, but my reading of the situation is that, despite shrinking advertising revenues and rising production costs, it suffers from fewer structural constraints than the press in the developed countries and therefore must think beyond mere survival. Even so, survival must have a purpose.

So, what role should be expected at a time like this?

Where the Constitution is an authentic expression of the sovereign will of the people, the first task of the press should be to defend it and all institutions established under it, and to hold public officials accountable to it.

But where, as in our own case, the legitimacy of the Constitution is contested — some persons learned in the law have called the document a forgery — the press should defend it only with strong reservations, call attention to its defects and any abuses of its more acceptable provisions.

The press must also defend unequivocally the rule of law. Democracy and the rule of law are but the two sides of a single coin. But in defending the rule of law, the press must go beyond the form of the law or its mere existence to its substance, its content.

The apartheid authorities in South Africa did everything by the statute book. Still, the United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity.

So, the press had the duty to defend not laws that conform to the civilized usage, just laws justly administered, access to the machinery of justice, and equality before the law,

By now, the futility of trying to establish a democracy without democrats has become obvious. A constituency for democracy has to be built first, to serve as a foundation for democracy. The press is uniquely qualified to help build such a constituency. It can do this in several ways.

First, by emphasizing democratic themes, it can make the public think and talk about democracy. It can send the message that democracy matters; that, contrary to the belief in some quarters that democracy is a luxury to be pursued only after national development has been achieved, the best authorities hold the view that there can be no real development without democracy.

Second, the press can help strengthen the public's faith in democracy by highlighting triumphs of the democratic method, commending acts that promote democracy and calling attention to acts that undermine it.

A third way in which the press can help nurture and sustain democracy is by supplying the feedback that enriches the conversation between elected officials and citizens, and between candidates and voters. What the press reports right now is for the most part intra-elite conversation.

Fourth, the press can help build a constituency for democracy by tamping down expectations that democracy is a quick fix for the problems of the moment. Instead, the press should make the public recognize that democracy is essentially a slow process, often cumbersome and sometimes frustrating, not something guaranteed to produce rapid results.

Fifth, the press can help build a constituency for democracy by lowering the temperature of political rhetoric. The language of politics in Nigeria is inflated, brutal, self-righteous and harsh, and usually contains more than a hint of imminent violence. It poisons the wellsprings of rational discourse and makes the search for common ground difficult. Democracy, on the other hand, thrives on discussion and accommodation, compromise. Through sober, well-tempered reporting, the Nigerian press can lower the temperature of Nigerian politics and thus help develop a democratic culture.

In every discussion of the Nigerian condition, the failure of leadership, especially political leadership, invariably comes up as the core issue. Few persons will quarrel with this diagnosis. The story of Nigerian leadership has been for the most part a story of the encounter of the unprepared and the unforeseen.

As chief intermediary between candidates and the public, the press has a major responsibility to help recruit and test the leadership.

The press does not recruit the leadership in any direct sense. It does so by subjecting candidates for public office to close scrutiny, beaming the spotlight on those who perform well or poorly in difficult circumstances, thereby raising public consciousness that such officials have shown or failed to show a potential for leadership in a broader context.

The press has been sorely remiss in performing this task. It failed to scrutinize Malam Umaru Yar'Adua's record, and the nation was landed with a largely unknown person as president. In the same manner, it failed to scrutinize the records of gubernatorial, National Assembly and State Assembly candidates. This failure is in part responsible for the crisis of leadership that has crippled Nigeria at every level.

But the press must not rush to confer leadership or status on persons who have not earned it, as is increasingly the case. Reporters covering a beat think nothing of conferring awards of dubious merit on the persons or institutions they are covering. One newspaper even conferred an award on its own proprietor several weeks ago.

When the press proclaims a state chief executive as "governor of the year" or some product as "brand of the year" or some transaction on the Stock Exchange as the "offer of the year" — when journalists confer spurious prizes on the very officials and institutions they are supposed to keep in check, they become cheerleaders and boosters and enablers, and they put their credibility on the line.

I plead guilty myself to a species of the failing. When it was reported that the Resident Electoral Commissioner for Ekiti, Mrs Ayoka Adebayo, had vowed that she would not declare false returns as she was being pressured to do, I described her in my column for *The Nation* as a "true original." Two days later, it would turn out that she was neither true nor original. That I failed the test does not invalidate the principle: Be slow to canonize, and even slower to demonize.

Leadership is not the exclusive province of elected officials or holders of public office. The press should also see itself as part of the leadership of the country, with a responsibility to instruct, to show the light and help the public find the way, as the motto of Dr Azikiwe's West African Pilot, enjoined.

This means that journalists must be very knowledgeable and must strive constantly to take every opportunity to improve themselves and the editorial product, to cultivate expertise as well as the experts in the subjects they report. The attentive audience in Nigeria is highly knowledgeable, and journalists must strive to be several steps ahead of that audience.

In the absence of reliable census data, it is difficult to conduct meaningful opinion polls in Nigeria. Nevertheless, some media organizations conduct surveys from time to time. One newspaper even conducted an “exit” poll on an election that was still three weeks away. Polls conducted in the absence of reliable census data are shot through and through with error and must never be presented as scientific findings.

Journalism serves the public interest best when it is grounded on facts. Therefore, the press should engage in a relentless search for facts, and cultivate the nice sense of discrimination essential for distinguishing fact from rumour or gossip. Factual accuracy must never be compromised. If the details provided in a story are at variance with what readers or listeners know or witnessed, why should they place their faith in the reporter, or for that matter the organization that published the story?

A Freedom of Information Law that gives all citizens – not just journalists, as some of its opponents claim – access to non-classified information and documents will help the press do a better job of reporting public affairs. But even in the absence of such a law, the press should exploit the vast resources of the Internet to enhance performance. There is significant material out there, at least as much significant material as is available in unclassified documents.

All the same the campaign for a Freedom of Information Law should be pursued with all vigour. Senate President David Mark says that the draft bill before the National Assembly will not become law unless the press accepts his proposal to make defamation a penal crime, in which the truth or falsity of the publication at issue is immaterial. The only thing that counts is the fact of publication. The case begins and ends with the fact of publication.

Senator Mark’s stipulation is a measure of his commitment and of the commitment of the institution he leads, to open government and accountability, vital ingredients of democracy.

The only thing more outrageous than the stipulation is the award a newspaper conferred on Senator Mark the other day – an award he sent a junior aide to receive on his behalf.

In news work, some measure of self-censorship is inevitable and even healthy. One cannot report or write about everything that one knows.

But the press must also guard against the self-censorship that flows from closeness to power. Journalists are often torn between the pursuit of truth and their need and desire to be on good terms with the powerful, who are invariably the chief sources of news and intelligence, and the dispensers of favours, honours, and recognition. Closeness to power has its uses, but it is also the source of many kinds of temptation, among them the social climbing that constitutes, today, a form of corruption that is just as subversive of journalism as the storied brown envelope,” if not more so.

Closeness to power can blunt that skepticism, that critical edge that should be every journalist's armour against seduction and co-optation. Therefore, journalists must maintain a certain distance, an air space, between themselves and the high public officials they cover.

The press must be a voice for the voiceless, the downtrodden in society, the disconnected, the "wretched of the earth" to borrow Frantz Fanon's term, those who are often overlooked in the scheme of things. It should stand unequivocally in defence of human rights and justice. The political class may pontificate as much as it wishes about national unity or other forms of unity. But it is justice that unites. Without justice, there can be no unity.

The press must follow up and follow through and sustain a narrative on the major issues facing Nigeria. The best reporting I have seen on the oil industry in Nigeria and the crisis in the Delta has come from the foreign media. Until many of the transactions carried out in the name of privatization unraveled, the press gave no indication of just how dirty, how subversive of the public interest, many of the deals were. The Nigerian stock market was a giant bubble waiting to burst but many a journalist was too busy cashing in to look beneath the surface.

It is not enough to hop from one event to another.

What is going on under the surface? What does it mean today, and what will it mean tomorrow? Is there a trend, a pattern? These are the kinds of questions journalists should ask and try to answer as they seek build a picture of reality that can reveal a society to itself and serve as a basis for sound public policy. This kind of reporting calls for nothing less than a sociological imagination.

It does not come cheap. And yet, without it, the press will be reduced to reacting to events when one of its major tasks, as media sociologists tell us, is to carry out surveillance of the environment, correlate its parts, and warn of approaching danger.

It is in recognition of the need for this kind of reporting that the man we honour today has endowed the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism. Various organizations also advance this kind of journalism by award prizes for investigative reporting and features. But much more is required.

To this end, I would like to propose the establishment of a Fund for Investigative Journalism, which will provide grants to assist media organizations or freelance journalists to report and write on significant issues of public interest and disseminate their findings to the public.

The Fund will seek support from civil society groups, and from Nigerian and foreign organizations dedicated to the promotion of democracy and good government. It will be administered by an independent body set up by the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism, with members drawn from all strata of society. To avert even the appearance of a conflict of interest, funds will not be solicited from government and governmental institutions, nor from the private sector, organized or unorganized.

Finally, I return to the polarization, the lack of common purpose that has often vitiated media effectiveness in Nigeria.

Media proprietors are not in the business of philanthropy. They establish newspapers, newsmagazines, and broadcast media to pursue certain objectives and defend certain interests. These objectives and

interests vary from proprietor to proprietor, and it is still true that, when it really counts, the person who pays the piper will call the tune

Yet, some common ground can be found, some core national objectives that the media across Nigeria's geo-ethnic fault lines can embrace and articulate with one voice.

That common ground was best encapsulated in the Second National Development Plan 1970-74 that few persons now remember.

The goals of the Plan were to establish Nigeria firmly as:

a united, strong and self-reliant nation;
a great and dynamic economy;
a just and egalitarian society;
a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens, and
a free and democratic society

These goals constitute the sum-total of what led me earlier to define Nigeria as an ideal other things. It is an ideal worth striving for.

If the present political class cannot recover the magic of that era, the press should serve as a standard bearer for the common ground sketched so concisely in a document that stands as a monument to a time when Nigerians thought all things possible. I thank you Professor Wole Soyinka, to whom this day belongs, I thank the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism for counting me worthy of presenting this Lecture, and I thank you, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, for your time and attention.