Is it justified to describe journalists as literates or illiterates?

By Dan Osman Mwin

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The vice-chancellor of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Professor Otoo Ellis, is said to have 'reportedly described journalists as illiterates' (*Daily Guide, Monday, March 5, 2012, p.10*) and as a consequence of his impolite language, the Ashanti Regional branch of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) announced a boycott of activities of the university and have sustained the boycott until further notice.

Even though one would have expected the learned professor and the chief executive of the academic facility established to develop the requisite human resources for the scientific and technological advancement of this country to be diplomatic in his language and to have qualified, for example, the term journalists with 'some' or 'many of you journalists are illiterates', one would agree with me that indeed a lot need to be done to education and practice in journalism.

It is significant to recall that when some of us entered the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) between 1984 and 1986, and had the privilege to be tutored by the likes of Kojo Yankah (then director), Opoku Acheampong, Ofori Mante, Kweku Rockson, David Newton, Amponsah Bediako, Charles Kweku Abugre and many others to meet the high standard set out for students to meet, little did we know that we will live to see the type of journalism being practiced on the media landscape. I am indeed proud to belong to the GIJ past products since its establishment who have proved their worth as ambassadors of the institute.

Indeed listening to radio presenters on our private radio FM stations and reading most of the private newspapers, one wonders whether indeed the journalists involved had any credible and quality education in journalism and communication, and if they did whether they graduated from accredited journalism institutions such as the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), Jayee University College and the African University College of Communication (AUCC). However, it will be mind boggling if some or all of such journalists are products of the above mentioned institutions and that is a signal that either the selection process is porous or tuition and learning materials are inadequate.

It is significant to note that the University of Ghana School Of Communication Studies, and the Communication and Media Studies Department of the University of Education Winneba, have contributed immensely to post graduate education of people who never entered any journalism institution, yet today they are some of the best journalists or communicators one can talk about.

That explains why many people including the vice-chancellor of KNUST may be justified in describing journalists as illiterates, even though a bit too general. It is difficult to blame such people simply because of what we now listen to on our airwaves, view on our television networks and read from the various newspapers.

"Garbage in, garbage out," as the saying goes, simply means that if the citizenry is fed with negative news, they and the entire nation will as a consequence remain underdeveloped. On the other hand, if the citizenry is adequately educated, entertained, informed and mobilized, as expectected of the global media, then we would expect nothing short of development and growth.

In the public relations field, chief executives and other line managers are naturally suspicious of the media, just as journalists are by nature questioning and somewhat untrusting of those they put in the spotlight. Practitioners and others in organisations complain, "why does the press always sensationalize things." "They take things out of context ... or can't get things right." "I didn't say that!" "They take things out of context ... or twist things to fit their story."

Journalists counter with, "That organisation never tells the truth!"; "We don't get to talk with the person who has the real story and real news."; "What we get is PR crap."; "You get the feeling they're trying to hide something."

This explains why many Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) have very little respect for journalists today, not because all journalists are illiterates and incompetent, but because of the large number of them who come to them ostensibly to cover their events report on nothing at the end of the day. The most disturbing aspect of the situation is how they are able to get information about the event even when their media houses were not invited.

What we must all know is that the skills of news reporters worth their salt are writing ability, skill of synthesizing large amounts of information and interviewing ability among others.

Again we must all know that, the goal of reporters is not to insult the intelligence of the public, but to uncover the facts, to the fullest extent possible to keep watch on society's valued and cherished institutions. Ideally, reporters practice objectivity and have no causes to promote just or protect.

Journalists are also by the nature of their training expected to serve the public interest by helping them to understand what is happening around them through information and education.

Under the circumstances one will not hesitate to support the assertion by Professor Kwasi Ansu-Kyeremeh (my former lecturer and Head of Department, UEW), formerly of the University of Ghana and the University of Education Winneba, when commenting on this issue of 'illiterate journalism' that "a media practitioner is not necessarily a journalist. So if there is a media practitioner who knows not anything about the constitutional requirements of a journalist, and does not have the GJA code of ethics at her or his fingertips and represents herself or himself as a journalist, she or he will be sure to practice illiterate journalism."

That is why it is suicidal for the Ashanti Regional branch of GJA to continue to stay away from KNUST because it suggests that they will not investigate any good thing said about the University but rather bad things about the university, and that clearly will be worse journalism since you will be saying things you have made no effort to crosscheck and therefore will be feeding the reading public with untruths.

The Ashanti Regional branch of GJA should understand and appreciate the fact that Prof. Ellis is an individual but KNUST is a community with diverse groups and interests, and so staying away from the KNUST community as whole will not attract any sympathy and support. The important thing to do is to sit with the Vice-Chancellor to iron out their differences and also go a step further to put its own house in order because there are definitely illiterate journalists in their fold, period!

For the journalist to be seen as a literate, he or she does not need to be just a pleasing personality, but a normal person with normal personality who have the bundle of skills that often make good writers. These include information-gathering, analysis, idea formulation, idea presentation, articulateness, a will to persuade, and a will to win.

These qualities definitely should be what employers should be looking out for when hiring or employing journalists.

Similarly, the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) and the National Media Commission (NMC) must collaborate to train not

only to update journalists on modern trends in the profession, but also to re-orientate them towards professional journalism in its true sense and meaning.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Osman Mwin is the Head of Public Relations at Ministry of Health HQ, Accra. You can contact him on [[osmanapr@yahoo.com]].

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