

# IMPACT OF 'BROWN ENVELOPE JOURNALISM' ON NEWS COVERAGE IN GHANA

**Authors:** *Richmond Acheampong (Sunyani-Ghana).*

*Stephen Babangida Jesse (Tiger Beverages and Spices, Administrator, Ghana)*

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## Abstract

*Ghana is not spared the plague of brown envelope journalism. The study examined the impact of brown envelope journalism on news coverage in Ghana. It further determined if journalists accept brown envelopes and its negative effects on journalists. The simple random sampling technique was used to sample 200 journalists in Sunyani Municipality in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana for the study. It was observed among other things that all the 200 respondents denounced brown envelope journalism and vouched for its cessation. Besides it was recommended among other things that the National Labour Commission (NLC) and other relevant authorities should help address the poor pay for journalists.*

**Key Words:** *Brown Envelope; Journalism; News Coverage; Ghana.*

## Background

Ghana is not spared the plague of brown envelope journalism. Many Ghanaians view brown envelope journalism with contempt and have strongly and widely condemned the phenomenon. Moreover, the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA), which sets the parameters within which journalists can operate, bars journalists from accepting bribe or any form of inducement to influence the performance of their professional duties (GJA, 2016). However, some news sources and journalists have thrown caution to the winds and allowed the phenomenon to thrive.

According to the Report to the Centre for International Media Assistance (2010), nearly everyone agrees that brown envelope journalism is an enormous and extremely serious problem for journalism but journalists' groups have not done enough about it.

Skjerdal (2010) contended that brown envelope journalism is the transfer of different kinds of rewards from news sources to the journalist. Three things that characterise the phenomenon: it is normally done at a very personal level, it requires a considerable level of trust as it is usually executed in secret and it is an informal agreement. That is, the news sources readily part with a reward to influence the journalist in the exercise of his/her professional judgement and he/she too, either willingly or unwillingly receives it and the transaction is sealed in complete secrecy. *Omanga (2015) maintained* brown envelope journalism occurs when news sources or newsmakers transfer rewards to individual journalists with the intention of appealing to the local decision-making in exchange for positive or uncritical media coverage.

The origin of brown envelope journalism remains elusive to researchers. Kasoma (2000) suggested the history of brown envelope journalism dates back to the

18th century in the Western journalism. Now, the phenomenon is widespread and has been given various names in different countries. Forbes (2005) argued that brown envelope journalism may have evolved in the UK in the 1990s. Bartlett (1999) said brown envelopes was a critical element in the so-called "cash-for-questions affair", in which lobbyists allegedly paid two members of the British parliament on behalf of the influential businessman Mohamed Al-Fayed to post specific questions on the agenda for the House of Commons. Forbes further contended The Guardian that exposed the affair in October 1994, reported that the cash was in brown envelopes. Consequently, brown envelopes evolved to mean the equivalence of news sources giving money to journalists.

Moreover, Uko (2004) maintained that brown envelope journalism may have originated in Nigeria during the Second Republic (1979-1983) when journalists started to demand brown envelopes as a condition for conducting an interview. In Nigeria, brown envelope was common among journalists from government press where salaries were low. Skjerdal (2010) further said the exact origin of brown envelope journalism remains unclear. It may have possibly come from West Africa. Barimo (1997) agreed contending brown envelope journalism came from the practice among Ghanaians to secretly enclose bribe money in brown envelopes.

Kovach and Rosenthal (2001) said as truth seekers and truth presenters, the journalists are obliged to remain open and honest to their audiences. Furthermore, according to Kaufman (2010), whether the journalists receive cash for news as a result of low salaries, greed or other motivations, they work to suit governments, political personalities, corporations or private persons who desire to restrain what is published about them and are ready to

pay for it. Besides journalists who receive money or gifts from news sources are usually constrained publishing something against them. Elsewhere, including the US, journalists can find themselves caught between reporting objectively and maintaining access to valuable sources. Moreover, Plaisance and Deppa (2009) claimed bribery for news coverage tramples on widely recognised journalism values as well as weakens the credibility of media. In addition, Rodan (2000) found that when bribery for news coverage is pervasive in a country, the absence of accurate and reliable information may hamper the long-term prosperity of the local economy because modern markets rely heavily on the free flow of information. Besides Kumar (2006) discovered that the lack of trustworthy news coverage has serious consequences on the accountability of the government and stifles the development of civil society because it deprives the citizens of the right to know.

Again, according to Thembeisa Fakude, the head of Research Relations at the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, there have been many incidences in Africa where journalists were bribed to either ignore or white wash certain stories about some politicians, in what has become commonly known as "brown envelope journalism" (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2016).

What is more, Spence (2008) argued that bribery for news coverage undermines the integrity, and impartiality of media reporting culminating in widespread practice of fictional news, biased news or news for sale. The perceived impact of brown envelope journalism on news coverage necessitates the need to find out the actual impact of brown envelope journalism on news coverage in Ghana.

## Methodology

The study targeted journalists to determine the impact of brown envelope journalism on news coverage in Ghana. The simple random sampling technique was used to sample 200 journalists in Sunyani Municipality in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana for the study. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, which contained 8 questions.

Participants were asked what has occasioned brown envelope journalism, whether journalists have accepted brown envelopes before and if they asked for it. Furthermore, they were asked if journalists report the truth after collecting these brown envelopes, how brown envelopes affect their reportage and if their media houses have policies on the acceptance of brown envelopes. Finally, they were asked if brown envelopes affect the practice of journalism and if brown envelope journalism should continue.

The questionnaire was administered at the offices of the media houses of the participants in person by the researcher on July 1, 2016 and collected on August 22, 2016. All the 200 participants, representing 100 percent response rate, returned the questionnaire correctly completed.

## Findings

Table 1: Causes of Brown Envelope Journalism

Causes of brown envelope journalism	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Poor pay for journalists	121	60.5
Inadequate resources for journalists to work with	33	16.5

Poor monitoring of journalists by their media houses	46	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

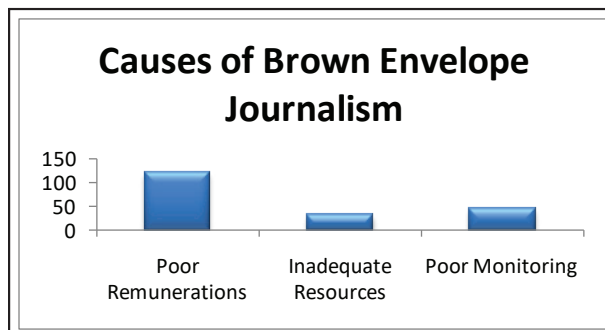


Figure 1: Causes of Brown Envelope Journalism

Table 2: Journalists Accepted Brown Envelopes Before

Have you accepted brown envelopes before?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	148	74
No	52	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

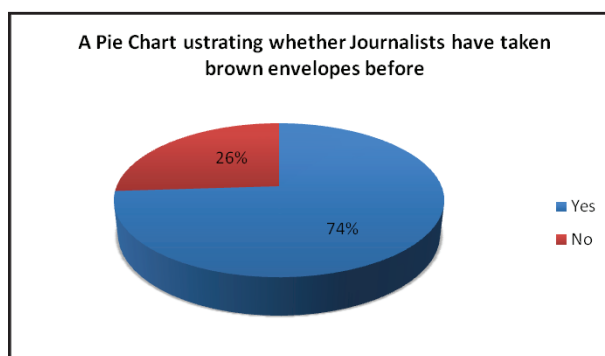
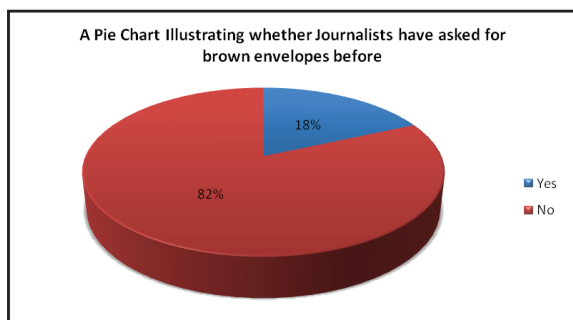


Figure 2: Journalists Accepted Brown Envelopes Before

Table 3: Journalists Asking for Brown Envelopes

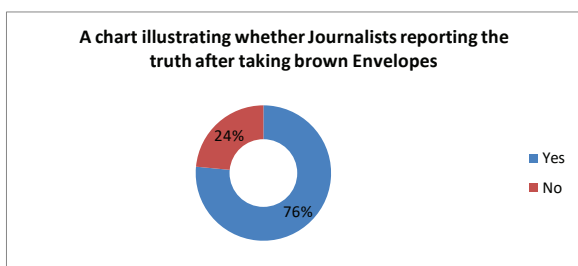
Did you ask for brown envelope?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	27	18.2
No	121	81.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 3:** Journalists Asking for Brown Envelopes

**Table 4:** Journalists Reporting the Truth after Taking Brown Envelopes

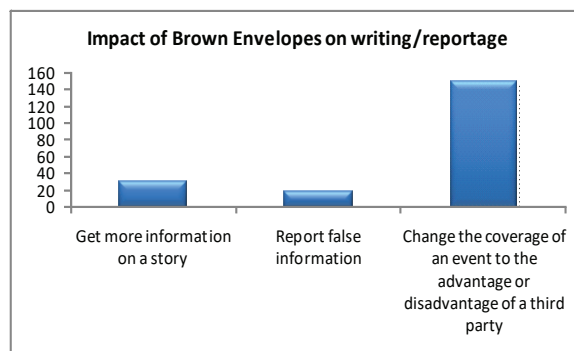
Do journalists report the truth after taking brown envelopes?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	153	76.5
No	47	23.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 4:** Journalists Reporting the Truth after Taking Brown Envelopes

**Table 5:** Impact of Brown Envelopes on Writing/Reportage

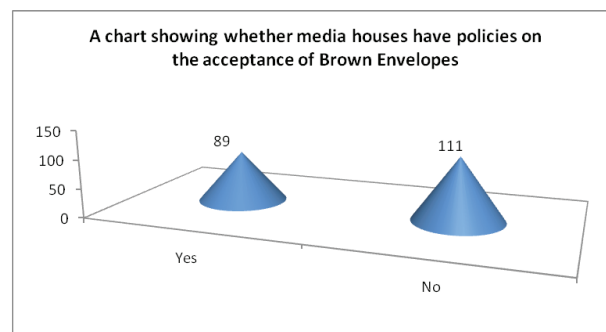
Impact of brown envelope journalism	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Get more information on a story	31	15.5
Report false information	19	9.5
Change the coverage of an event to the advantage or disadvantage of a third party	150	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 5:** Impact of Brown Envelopes on Writing/Reportage

**Table 6:** Media Houses Have Policies on the Acceptance of Brown Envelopes

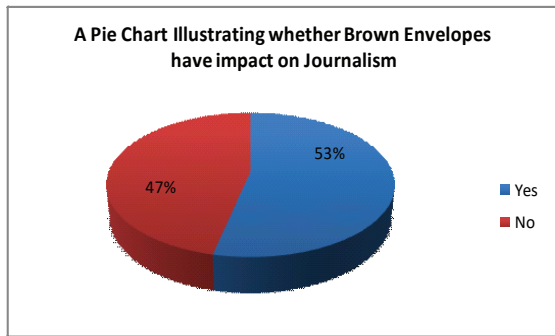
Does your media house have a policy on the acceptance of brown envelopes?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	89	44.5
No	111	55.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 6:** Media Houses Have Policies on the Acceptance of Brown Envelopes

**Table 7:** Brown Envelopes Have Impact on Journalism

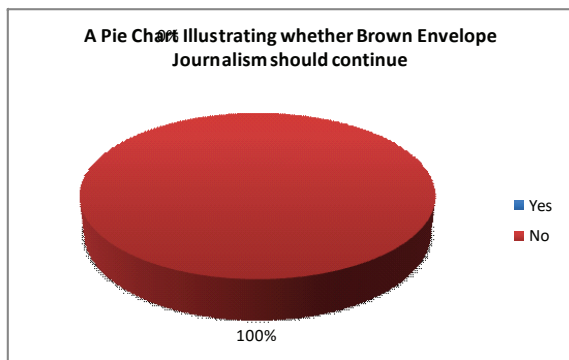
Do brown envelopes affect the practice of journalism?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	107	53.5
No	93	46.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 7:** Brown Envelopes Have Impact on Journalism

**Table 8:** Brown Envelope Journalism Should Continue

Should brown envelope journalism continue?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	0
No	200	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 8:** Brown Envelope Journalism Should Continue

It was observed that 121 journalists representing 60.5 percent of respondents indicted poor pay for journalists for “brown envelope journalism”; 33 of them, representing 16.5 percent respondents blamed inadequate resources for journalists to work with for the prevalence of “brown envelope journalism” while 46 of them representing 23 percent respondents said poor monitoring of journalists by their media houses has occasioned the phenomenon.

It was also discovered that 148 journalists, made up of 74 percent respondents admitted to accepting brown envelopes before, while 52 of them representing 26 percent of respondents said they have not accepted brown envelopes before. In addition, it was revealed that 27 journalists representing 18.2 percent of respondents said they asked for brown envelopes and 121 of them, representing 81.8 percent respondents said they did not ask for it.

Moreover, it was revealed that 153 journalists, representing 76.5 percent of respondents alluded they report the truth after taking brown envelopes, while 47 of them, made up of 23.5 percent respondents admitted they do not report the truth after taking brown envelopes.

Besides the survey showed that 31 journalists, made up of 15.5 percent respondents admitted they get more information on a story when they received brown envelopes; 19 of them, representing 9.5 percent of the respondents confessed that they report falsehood after receiving brown envelopes while 150 of them, representing 75 percent of respondents revealed that they change the coverage of an event to the advantage or disadvantage of a third party when they received brown envelopes.

Again, it was established that 89 journalists representing 44.5 percent of respondents said their media houses have policies on the acceptance of brown envelopes, while 111 of them, representing 55.5 percent of the respondents indicated their media establishments do not policies on the acceptance of brown envelopes.

What is more, it was realised that 107 journalists, made up of 53.5 percent of the respondents admitted brown envelopes affect the practice of journalism and 93 of them representing 46.5 of respondents said brown envelopes do not affect the practice of journalism.



Last but not least and perhaps interestingly enough, it was found that all 200 journalists representing 100 percent of the respondents did not want brown envelope journalism to continue, while none of them, made up of 0 percent of respondents wanted the phenomenon to continue.

## Discussions

The observation that a staggering 60.5 percent of respondents indicted poor pay for journalists for the prevalence of brown envelope journalism is sadly, a bad omen for Ghana's governance and fledgling democracy. The media is regarded as the fourth arm of government. Consequently, if journalists, who are purportedly charged with the responsibility of checking the other arms of government (the executive, legislature and judiciary), are poorly paid, one wonders if they will feel motivated enough to discharge their role in an orderly manner to ensure the sustenance of good governance and democracy. Some may contest better pay is not the only means of motivating workers to perform excellently. But better pay is a very critical component as far as motivation of workers is concerned irrespective of what one thinks.

One might also contend the observation may serve a wakeup call for media establishments to pay their journalists well and perhaps importantly, for the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) that while setting the parameters within which journalists can operate, it is also important that the executives of the association endeavour to make a concerted effort to unionise the association so that it can negotiate for good salaries for its members. This is because paying journalists well may not only help end brown envelope journalism, but also boost the morale of journalists and make them well placed to compete with their counterparts in other professions.

Furthermore, the discovery that 74 percent of the respondents admitted to patronising brown envelopes before can be seen as a blessing in disguise because it pays to accept reality than living in denial of it. Now that it has been established that brown envelope journalism is rife in Ghana and killing 'wholesome journalism', media owners, desirous of safeguarding the image and reputation of their businesses may be compelled to pay their journalists well to forestall the unexpected. Journalists, who accept brown envelopes usually, find themselves susceptible to unnecessary libel suits because as Kaufman (2010) argued they work in the interests of governments, political personalities, corporations or private persons who desire to restrain what is published about them and are ready to pay for it. Of course libel suits are not pleasant experiences. In most instances, they crush not only the reputations of the journalists, who fell short of the law but also their media organisations.

The revelation that 15.5 percent respondents admitting that they get more information on a story when they received brown envelopes is also a cause for concern. This is because regardless of how significant an event/issue might be to society this category of journalists chooses not to cover it comprehensively unless they are bribed. Their behaviour confirms why trivial issues about rival political parties are usually given extensive coverage at the expense of more important issues such as rural maternal deaths because of the absence health centres or school children studying at under trees while governments' extravagance remains unabated.

For example, when the Supreme Court on July 27, 2016 sentenced the Montie 3 to four months imprisonment for bringing the name of the court into disrepute and scandalising its work, it was bizarre to see that rather than chronicling the plight of numerous remand

prisoners who have been behind bars for years without trial, some journalists probably being bribed, reported extensively on the clarion call for the President to invoke his powers embedded in Article 72 of the 1992 Constitution to pardon the three convicts.

In addition, the revelation that 26 percent of respondents said they have not patronised brown envelopes before paints a glimmer of hope. It at least tells that in spite of the poor pay of journalists, inadequate resources for them to work with and most media houses not barring their journalists from accepting brown envelopes, some journalists remain truthful to the Ghana Journalists Association's (GJA) Code of Ethics, which forbids journalists from accepting bribe or any form of inducement to influence the performance of their professional duties.

Besides having 81.8 percent respondents said that though they accepted brown envelopes, they did not ask for it, does not in any way render baseless Kaufman's (2010) claim that whether the journalists receive cash for coverage as a result of low salaries, greed or other motivations, they work to suit governments, political personalities, corporations or private persons who desire to restrain what is published about them and are ready to pay for it. Moreover, it fails to defeat the argument by Kaufman (2010) that journalists who take money or gifts from their news sources are usually constrained publishing something against them.

On the other hand, 76.5 percent of respondents alluding that they report the truth after taking brown envelopes, challenges Kaufman's (2010) claim that whether the journalists receive cash for coverage because of low salaries, greed or other motivations, they work to suit governments, political personalities, corporations or private persons who desire to restrain what is published about them and are ready to pay for it. It also disputes

that journalists who take money or gifts from their news sources are usually constrained something against them.

Again, 75 percent of respondents saying that they change the coverage of an event to the advantage or disadvantage of a third party when they received brown envelopes violates ethics of journalism, and resonates completely with the revelation from Spence (2008) that incidence of bribery for news undermine the integrity and impartiality of media reporting, culminating in widespread practice of fictional news, biased news or news for sale. Such precedence might have occasioned some Ghanaians' inability to see journalists as partners in development and so have tended to be hostile to them, resulting sometimes in chilling attacks on journalists with some of them losing even their lives. The killing of journalists has made some Ghanaians label journalism "an extremely dangerous profession". This is a blow to the practice of journalism because it discourages potential young talents to pursue the profession, while charlatans enter and perpetuate acts of indecency.

What is more, the revelation that 55.5 percent of the respondents said their media houses do not have policies on the acceptance of brown envelopes may explain the reason for brown envelope journalism notoriety in Ghana. If most media houses had policies that set the parameters within which their journalists can operate with regard to acceptance of brown envelopes, one can bet the phenomenon would have been defeated. Yes, because we would have had a scenario of news sources with brown envelopes stuffed with cash, ready to part with, but journalists reluctant to patronise them because their work policies bar them from doing so.

Lastly, having 53.5 percent of respondents said brown envelopes affect the practice of journalism and more significantly, 100

percent of respondents wanting the practice to be stopped is a clear manifestation that a battle against brown envelope journalism can be won decisively if it is fought fiercely enough. Interestingly, one would have expected the journalists, who are the direct beneficiaries of the phenomenon to sabotage such move. However, once they have demonstrated their displeasure about the practice and want it ceased, the battle is half won. Though some of the event organisers may try to stay one step ahead, brown envelope journalism will eventually be wiped out from Ghana.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The study examined the impact of brown envelope journalism on news coverage in Ghana. It was observed that majority of the respondents attributed the prevalence of brown envelope journalism to poor pay for journalists while minority of the respondents said poor monitoring of journalists by their media houses coupled with inadequate resources for journalists to work with has occasioned the phenomenon. It was also discovered that majority of the respondents said they have patronised brown envelopes before but did not ask for it; only a few of them said they have received brown envelopes before but asked for it.

In addition, interestingly and perhaps strangely enough, it was revealed all the 200 journalists denounced brown envelope journalism and vouched for its cessation. Moreover, it was established that a significant number of journalists admitted that brown envelope journalism affect the practice of journalism and majority of respondents said their media establishments do not have policies on the acceptance of brown envelopes.

Besides it was found that brown envelope journalism has devastating consequences

on the practice of journalism in Ghana as majority of the journalists confessed that they change the coverage of an event to the advantage or disadvantage of a third party when they received brown envelopes. What is more, though an insignificant number, it is worrying: 9.5 percent of respondents admitted that they report falsehood after they received brown envelopes.

Based on the study's findings, all Ghanaians must feel inspired and challenged to help stamp out the despicable phenomenon of brown envelope journalism from Ghana. To stamp out brown envelope journalism from Ghana, media owners must endeavour to pay their journalists well. In addition, further studies to determine media owners' driving motivation for not paying their journalists well is recommended.

Furthermore, news sources that are notorious for stuffing brown envelopes with cash for journalists should be tracked by the National Media Commission (NMC) and sanctioned. Moreover, journalists who patronise brown envelopes should emulate the example of their counterparts, who have chosen to remain truth to the ethics of journalism in spite of their poor pay.

Again, people should stop labelling journalism "an extremely dangerous profession" so as to make the journalism profession attractive to young potential talents.

Last but not least, the National Labour Commission (NLC) and other relevant authorities should help address the poor pay for journalists.

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