

Full Length Research

Revisiting the 'Brown Envelope Syndrome': A Case for Legitimate Media Hospitality in Nigerian Journalism

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The practice of journalists receiving monetary or material appreciation after interviews, press events, or media coverage has for decades provoked intense ethical debates within the Nigerian media landscape. Commonly dubbed the 'brown envelope syndrome,' such gestures are often perceived by the public as bribes, portraying journalists as corrupt or easily compromised. However, Professor Ben Nwanne of the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka, advances a refreshing academic intervention through the concept of 'Legitimate Media Hospitality.' He argues that tokens given in appreciation should not automatically be construed as unethical, provided they do not influence reportage or compromise professional integrity. This paper revisits the 'brown envelope' controversy, interrogating it through ethical, cultural, and professional lenses. It seeks to situate Nwanne's notion of Legitimate Media Hospitality within broader media ethics discourse, contending that cultural contexts, socio-economic realities, and journalistic traditions must inform the interpretation of such acts. Using the theoretical frameworks of Social Responsibility Theory and Deontological Ethics, this opinion paper argues for a balanced understanding of journalists' interactions with sources, where genuine appreciation is distinguished from corrupt inducement. Ultimately, it advocates the institutionalisation of ethical guidelines that recognise the difference between hospitality and bribery, in order to restore public trust and uphold professional dignity in Nigerian journalism.

Keywords: Brown Envelope, Media Ethics, Legitimate Media Hospitality, Journalism Practice, Nigeria, Professionalism, Ben Nwanne

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Introduction

Journalism, as a noble profession, thrives on human engagement through interviews, observations, and social interactions that generate information for public enlightenment. Journalists are society's watchdogs, constantly engaging individuals, groups, and institutions to elicit facts, clarify issues, and hold power to account. In the process of carrying out these tasks, they often encounter human gestures of appreciation — a handshake, a word of gratitude, or sometimes, a token of financial or material value. In the Nigerian context, however, such gestures have become a subject of moral suspicion, popularly labelled the 'brown envelope syndrome.' The term has, over time, assumed a negative connotation, suggesting unethical inducement or bribery intended to distort factual reporting or influence editorial judgement. Corroborating the above, Onyebadi and Alami, 2016 contend that accepting gifts can lead to biased reporting, undermining trust in the media. They added that though gift-giving is a norm in some cultures, but it could compromise objectivity in journalistic practice. In their perspective, Okoro and Chinwebo-Onuoha (2013) reached the conclusion after a survey,

that greed is the salient cause of the “brown envelope syndrome” in Nigeria. Their study emphasises that this practice influences journalism practice negatively as some significant issues are downplayed while less important issues are exaggerated.

This public perception has continued to cast a long shadow on the professional image of journalists. The phrase ‘brown envelope’ evokes a sense of compromise, corruption, and the erosion of journalistic credibility. Consequently, journalists who receive such tokens even as harmless expressions of gratitude, are often branded as corrupt or ethically weak. Yet, as Professor Ben Nwanne of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, has argued, this blanket condemnation oversimplifies a complex ethical and cultural reality. His concept of ‘Legitimate Media Hospitality’ provides a nuanced interpretation, suggesting that not every gift to a journalist constitutes bribery. According to Nwanne, such gestures, when freely given as post-engagement appreciation and not demanded or tied to editorial outcome, should be viewed within the bounds of normal social courtesy.

This conceptual rethinking challenges the prevailing orthodoxy in Nigerian journalism ethics, which has often adopted Western interpretations of professional conduct without adequate regard for local realities. In many African societies, the act of giving is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric as a symbol of respect, gratitude, and goodwill. Rejecting such gestures outrightly, therefore, may appear socially rude or culturally insensitive. Moreover, the economic conditions under which many journalists operate, characterised by poor remuneration, irregular salaries, and limited welfare provisions complicate the moral judgement of such practices. Thus, the question arises: should every form of appreciation to a journalist be labelled corruption? Or can some gestures be recognised as ethically legitimate, provided they do not compromise professional judgement?

This paper explores these questions through the theoretical and ethical prism of Professor Ben Nwanne’s Legitimate Media Hospitality. It interrogates the cultural and professional dimensions of the brown envelope debate and argues for a more contextually grounded framework of media ethics in Nigeria. The paper contends that while corruption must be condemned in any form, journalism ethics should also acknowledge the socio-cultural environments in which journalists operate. Ultimately, it seeks to reclaim the moral space between appreciation and bribery, and to restore dignity to the journalism profession through balanced ethical reappraisal.

Literature Review / Conceptual Clarifications

The Brown Envelope Phenomenon

The term ‘brown envelope’ has become a metaphor for corruption within journalistic practice in many parts of Africa, particularly Nigeria. It describes the act of offering or receiving money, usually tucked in an envelope, ostensibly to influence news coverage, editorial judgement, or the framing of a story (Okoye, 2013). The term emerged from the routine practice of distributing honoraria to journalists after press conferences, workshops, or official events, which gradually evolved into a morally ambiguous phenomenon. While some journalists justify the act as a token of appreciation for transport or logistics, critics argue that it amounts to an inducement that undermines objectivity and fairness — two pillars of professional journalism (Oso, 2012).

In the public sphere, the ‘brown envelope’ has become synonymous with media corruption. It suggests that journalists are easily compromised, thereby eroding public confidence in the integrity of the press. According to Uko (2015), the persistence of the ‘brown envelope’ culture reflects broader systemic issues such as poor remuneration, ownership interference, and weak ethical enforcement in Nigerian journalism. Yet, this interpretation may not fully capture the socio-cultural realities that shape interpersonal exchanges in African societies, where giving and receiving are often embedded in communal norms of hospitality and reciprocity.

Gift-Giving and Cultural Context

To understand the complexity of the brown envelope debate, it is essential to situate it within the broader context of African social ethics. In many African societies, gift-giving is not merely a transaction but an expression of goodwill, respect, and appreciation (Mbiti, 1999). It functions as a social lubricant that strengthens relationships and reinforces communal bonds. Refusing a gift, in certain cultural settings, may even be interpreted as arrogance or rejection of goodwill (Nwanne, 2021). Thus, a strict Western interpretation of journalistic ethics, which views all gifts as potential bribes, may not entirely align with the moral logic of African cultures.

In the Nigerian media environment, journalists often operate within this dual moral order - professional codes influenced by Western ethical frameworks, and traditional expectations of social reciprocity. The tension between these two systems creates ethical ambiguity. What may appear as corruption under one lens could, under another, be seen as an act of courtesy. Hence, the discourse on journalistic gifts must go beyond rigid moral binaries and engage with the cultural and economic contexts that shape journalistic practice.

The Concept of Media Hospitality

The notion of media hospitality refers to the courtesies, material or otherwise, extended to journalists during or after professional engagements. These may include meals, souvenirs, transportation allowances, or even modest cash tokens. In Western journalism, such practices are regulated under strict ethical guidelines that discourage any form of gift that could influence editorial independence (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). However, even in advanced media systems, certain forms of hospitality such as press luncheons, sponsored travel, or event souvenirs are tolerated, provided they do not compromise objectivity (McQuail, 2010).

It is within this contested space that Professor Ben Nwanne introduces the concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality. His argument acknowledges the reality that journalists often receive gifts, but insists that such gestures must be evaluated based on intent and consequence. If the gift does not demand favourable coverage or distort professional judgement, it should be classified as legitimate hospitality rather than bribery. According to Nwanne (2021), the moral essence of media hospitality lies in the freedom of the gift. It must be voluntarily given, without coercion, and must not corrupt the journalist's conscience or reportage.

Journalistic Ethics and Professionalism

Journalistic ethics provide the moral compass guiding professional conduct in news gathering, processing, and dissemination. Core values such as accuracy, fairness, independence, and accountability are universally upheld in journalism codes of ethics (Ward, 2018). The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) Code of Ethics (1998) explicitly warns against accepting bribes, gratification, or any inducement capable of influencing editorial content. However, it offers limited guidance on how journalists should respond to culturally acceptable gestures of appreciation. This gap leaves room for subjective interpretation, leading to confusion between legitimate hospitality and unethical gratification.

Professionalism, therefore, demands that journalists develop moral discernment to distinguish between appreciation and inducement. The critical question should not merely be whether a gift was received, but whether it influenced the journalist's decision, tone, or judgement. As Asemah (2011) observes, ethical journalism is less about rigid prohibition and more about the preservation of public trust through transparency, integrity, and accountability. The concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality thus invites a re-evaluation of journalistic ethics in light of cultural context and moral intent.

In a nutshell, the so-called brown envelope syndrome cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural, economic, and professional realities of Nigerian journalism. While bribery remains ethically indefensible, not all forms of gift-giving fall into that category. As Professor Ben Nwanne proposes, there is a moral and professional space for legitimate appreciation that does not compromise integrity. The challenge lies in establishing clear ethical boundaries that differentiate Legitimate Media Hospitality from corruption, ensuring that journalists remain both culturally sensitive and professionally upright.

Theoretical Framework

The ethical debate surrounding the acceptance of gifts by journalists can be meaningfully analysed within specific theoretical lenses that illuminate the moral, social, and cultural dimensions of professional behaviour. For this paper, three frameworks are particularly relevant — the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, Deontological Ethics, and Cultural Relativism. Each offers a unique perspective for understanding Legitimate Media Hospitality as propounded by Professor Ben Nwanne, and for interrogating its implications for journalistic integrity within the Nigerian context.

Social Responsibility Theory of the Press

The Social Responsibility Theory, one of the normative theories of the press, emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a response to the perceived excesses of libertarian journalism. Propounded by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press (1949), the theory emphasises that while the media must be free to report, such freedom carries an obligation to act responsibly towards society. Journalists are therefore expected to operate with integrity, fairness, and accountability, ensuring that the right to free expression does not conflict with the public interest (McQuail, 2010).

In applying this theory to the brown envelope debate, journalists have a moral duty to avoid actions that could undermine public trust in the press. Accepting gifts or money in exchange for favourable coverage directly violates the principles of social responsibility because it subordinates the public interest to private gain. However, the Social Responsibility Theory also recognises that media institutions do not exist in isolation; they function within social and cultural environments. Thus, understanding Legitimate Media Hospitality requires balancing professional ideals with societal realities. If a gift is genuinely an act of appreciation and not a demand for distortion, then, under this theory, it may not necessarily breach the journalist's social responsibility, provided transparency and professional judgement are maintained.

Professor Nwanne's argument fits within this interpretive framework, as it does not advocate indiscriminate acceptance of gifts but calls for moral discernment grounded in professional accountability. The theory therefore provides a balanced ethical anchor, one that upholds public trust while accommodating cultural expressions of goodwill.

Deontological Ethics

Deontological ethics, derived from the Greek word *deon* meaning 'duty,' is a moral philosophy associated primarily with the works of Immanuel Kant. It holds that actions are morally right or wrong based on adherence to rules or duties, rather than on their consequences (Kant, 1785/1996). In the context of journalism, deontological ethics demands that practitioners act according to moral principles such as honesty, fairness, and independence, regardless of potential benefits or outcomes. A journalist guided by deontological reasoning must therefore avoid accepting gifts that could be construed as compromising ethical duty, even if the intention appears harmless.

However, the absolutist approach may be too rigid in contexts where moral codes intersect with cultural norms. Professor Nwanne's Legitimate Media Hospitality offers a more flexible moral reasoning, one that acknowledges the journalist's duty to remain ethical while recognising the social meaning of appreciation. From a deontological standpoint, the morality of receiving a gift would depend on whether the journalist's duty to truth and objectivity remains intact. If the gift neither influences reportage nor affects editorial independence, it does not necessarily violate moral duty. Thus, Nwanne's concept can be viewed as a contextual adaptation of deontological principles to a culturally nuanced professional environment.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism posits that moral judgements and ethical standards must be understood within the cultural contexts from which they arise (Benedict, 1934). It rejects universalist moral claims, arguing instead that what is considered right or wrong varies across societies. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing journalism ethics in non-Western societies like Nigeria, where social norms, traditions, and moral expectations differ significantly from those of Western cultures that largely shaped modern media ethics.

In African societies, acts of giving and hospitality occupy an essential place in social relationships. Refusing a gift may be seen as an insult, while accepting it signifies goodwill and respect (Mbiti, 1999). Cultural relativism thus provides an interpretive framework for understanding why the outright condemnation of gift acceptance may appear culturally incongruous. Professor Nwanne's concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality aligns with this view, as it seeks to contextualise media ethics within African moral systems without eroding professional integrity. It acknowledges that ethical journalism must evolve in harmony with the cultural realities of the societies it serves.

Nevertheless, cultural relativism must be applied cautiously. While it highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity, it cannot justify practices that overtly subvert the journalist's obligation to truth. The challenge, therefore, lies in striking a balance between cultural accommodation and ethical universality. The Nigerian media must craft ethical standards that respect both professional and cultural values — ensuring that hospitality remains legitimate and not a veil for corruption.

Integrative Perspective

Together, these three frameworks provide a comprehensive moral and theoretical foundation for understanding Legitimate Media Hospitality. The Social Responsibility Theory underscores the journalist's duty to serve the public interest; Deontological Ethics emphasises adherence to moral duty regardless of material inducement; while Cultural Relativism contextualises ethical judgement within societal values. When synthesised, they form a balanced interpretive lens through which to view the reception of gifts in journalism not as inherently corrupt, but as acts whose ethical value depends on intention, context, and professional impact.

Professor Ben Nwanne's proposition thus finds theoretical legitimacy within this triadic framework. It neither trivialises corruption nor ignores cultural nuances; instead, it calls for a more reflective journalism ethics, one that harmonises duty, responsibility, and culture in pursuit of a morally credible media profession.

The Nigerian Context

Historical Roots of 'Brown Envelope' Journalism

The practice of offering financial or material tokens to journalists after professional engagements in Nigeria has historical antecedents traceable to the colonial and post-colonial media era. During the early years of journalism in Nigeria, media practitioners were largely activists and nationalists who saw journalism as a tool for political emancipation rather than economic advancement (Omu, 1978). However, with the institutionalisation of journalism as a profession after

independence, the relationship between journalists and their news sources began to evolve. As the state and corporate institutions gained influence over public communication, journalists increasingly depended on such entities for access to information, transportation, and accommodation — benefits that sometimes came in the form of financial reimbursements or gifts.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the growing commercialisation of the media and the proliferation of privately-owned outlets intensified competition for news coverage. Public relations officers and event organisers began to offer ‘brown envelopes’ to ensure favourable publicity or guarantee the presence of journalists at press briefings (Oso, 2012). What may have begun as transport support gradually acquired an ethical stain, as some journalists started to solicit or expect such envelopes before performing their duties. This phenomenon, which became popularly known as “brown envelope journalism,” eroded public trust and gave the impression that journalists could be “bought.”

Nevertheless, as Nwanne (2021) observes, this narrative oversimplifies the moral and economic complexity of Nigerian journalism. He contends that the persistent stigmatisation of journalists ignores structural and cultural factors that shape their professional realities. This historical background thus provides the foundation upon which the concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality emerges — an effort to restore moral nuance to a practice often painted in monochrome.

Economic Pressures and Poor Remuneration

One of the most significant factors fuelling the brown envelope phenomenon is the precarious economic condition under which many Nigerian journalists operate. Studies (Asemah, 2011; Uko, 2015) consistently highlight poor remuneration, irregular salaries, and lack of welfare as major challenges confronting the profession. In some media houses, journalists go for months without pay, forcing them to rely on goodwill gestures or external tokens to meet basic needs.

The economic vulnerability of journalists creates fertile ground for ethical compromise. When financial hardship becomes chronic, the acceptance of a token from a news source may be rationalised as a survival mechanism rather than a moral failure. This blurring of ethical boundaries weakens professional independence and exposes the media to manipulation. However, Nwanne’s (2021) argument introduces a philosophical distinction between necessity-driven compromise and courtesy-driven appreciation. He insists that while poverty may explain corruption, it cannot justify it; yet, acts of legitimate appreciation given after professional engagement, and not demanded, should not be condemned wholesale.

Therefore, any ethical conversation about media hospitality in Nigeria must first acknowledge the economic context of journalistic practice. A well-paid journalist, secure in their livelihood, is less likely to interpret every gesture as indispensable or to succumb to undue influence. Improving the welfare of journalists is thus a prerequisite for restoring ethical stability in the profession.

Ownership Influence and Political Pressures

Another defining feature of Nigerian journalism is the pervasive influence of media ownership and political control. Many media organisations are either owned by politicians, business elites, or religious institutions with vested interests in shaping public opinion (Oso, 2012). This ownership structure often compromises editorial independence and pressures journalists to conform to ideological or partisan expectations. Under such conditions, the moral conversation about gift acceptance becomes even more complicated.

If a journalist is already under institutional pressure to frame stories in line with ownership interests, the ethical weight of a small token from a news source becomes relatively insignificant compared to the larger structural manipulations at play. Yet, it is precisely within such constraints that Professor Nwanne’s Legitimate Media Hospitality calls for professional discernment. Journalists, he argues, must cultivate internal ethical strength to resist inducements while maintaining cultural sensitivity and social grace. Institutional integrity must also be strengthened through ethical training, transparency, and the establishment of internal review mechanisms to monitor professional conduct.

Public Misinterpretations and Media Credibility

The Nigerian public’s perception of journalists is shaped by both experience and stereotype. To many citizens, the image of a journalist receiving an envelope after an event automatically signals corruption. This perception has been reinforced by occasional scandals and sensational reports that expose unethical behaviour among practitioners. However, such generalisations are often unfair and fail to recognise the legitimate aspects of social interaction inherent in media work.

As Olatunji (2016) notes, the media’s credibility is highly sensitive to public perception, and even minor ethical ambiguities can erode trust. When the public misconstrues every act of appreciation as bribery, it damages the collective reputation of the press and undermines its role as a moral authority. This misinterpretation also discourages genuine expressions of gratitude from newsmakers who fear being misunderstood.

Professor Nwanne's proposition therefore seeks to rebuild a more balanced moral narrative. By introducing Legitimate Media Hospitality as a conceptual framework, he provides journalists and media scholars with a vocabulary for distinguishing between corrupt inducement and genuine appreciation. The concept reframes hospitality as an ethically neutral act until intent and consequence are proven otherwise. This approach aligns with the principle of fairness — both to journalists who act with integrity and to the cultural contexts that shape human interaction in Africa.

Towards a Contextual Ethical Understanding

Understanding journalism ethics in Nigeria requires an appreciation of its socio-economic and cultural environment. Western media ethics, while foundational, may not adequately address the moral complexities of developing societies. Nwanne's call for a re-evaluation of gift ethics is therefore not a justification for corruption, but a scholarly effort to harmonise universal professional standards with local moral logic. The goal is to redefine ethical journalism in a way that acknowledges human warmth, social grace, and gratitude — values that are deeply embedded in African culture.

By reframing the debate, the concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality challenges Nigerian journalism to evolve beyond reactionary moralism and towards reflective professionalism — one that is self-critical, culturally grounded, and socially responsible.

The Concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality

The Genesis of the Concept

The idea of Legitimate Media Hospitality is a philosophical response to the persistent moral panic surrounding gift-giving in Nigerian journalism. It was first articulated by Professor Ben Nwanne, a media scholar, who sought to introduce intellectual clarity into a practice often condemned without context. Nwanne observed that in Nigerian media discourse, the term 'brown envelope' had become an automatic indictment — a label used to shame journalists even when no ethical violation had occurred. He argued that such blanket condemnation reflects a lack of cultural sensitivity and a superficial understanding of the moral dynamics of African society.

According to Nwanne (2021), not every gesture extended to journalists is driven by corrupt intent. In many African communities, acts of hospitality and appreciation are deeply ingrained in social relationships. To refuse a token of gratitude offered after service could even be interpreted as arrogance or disrespect. Therefore, there is a moral distinction between a bribe that precedes or influences coverage and a gift that follows and appreciates honest work. This distinction forms the cornerstone of Nwanne's idea of Legitimate Media Hospitality — an attempt to balance professional ethics with cultural morality.

Defining Legitimate Media Hospitality

Nwanne defines Legitimate Media Hospitality as "a culturally grounded and ethically sound gesture of appreciation offered to journalists after the performance of their legitimate professional duties, without prior solicitation, and without intent to influence content or judgement."

This definition highlights three critical conditions for legitimacy:

1. Timing: The gesture must come after journalistic work has been completed, not before.
2. Intention: The purpose must be appreciation, not manipulation.
3. Consent: The journalist must not demand or expect the gift as a precondition for coverage.

Where these conditions are met, Nwanne argues, the act cannot be ethically equated with bribery. Instead, it represents a human expression of gratitude that aligns with African values of hospitality, reciprocity, and communal respect.

Moral and Cultural Justification

The ethical defence of Legitimate Media Hospitality lies in its cultural embeddedness. African societies are governed by moral codes that emphasise community, generosity, and relationship-building. The act of offering refreshment, transport support, or a modest token after an event is not necessarily transactional; it is a customary form of appreciation. To dismiss such gestures as unethical would amount to imposing Western moral absolutism on a society whose values are relational rather than individualistic.

Moreover, as Nwanne (2021) notes, journalists do not operate in a cultural vacuum. Their ethical behaviour must be interpreted within the moral logic of their environment. The challenge, therefore, is not to outlaw hospitality but to discern

its intention and effect. A journalist who maintains editorial independence and transparency while accepting a post-coverage token has not betrayed professional ethics. What matters is whether the act corrupts judgement or compromises truth.

In essence, Legitimate Media Hospitality seeks to decolonise journalism ethics by proposing a framework that harmonises universal principles of integrity with indigenous norms of gratitude and respect.

The Thin Line: Hospitality versus Bribery

Despite its moral rationale, Nwanne acknowledges that the boundary between hospitality and bribery can be delicate. The same gesture that is legitimate in one context could be unethical in another, depending on motive and perception. For instance, if a journalist requests a token before coverage, it constitutes extortion; if a news source offers a gift before coverage with the aim of securing favourable reportage, it amounts to bribery. If a token is offered after coverage purely as appreciation, without expectation of future favour, it may qualify as legitimate hospitality.

The ethical value of the act, therefore, lies not in the materiality of the gift but in its intention, timing, and effect. Transparency is key: a journalist who discloses such gestures to editors or colleagues demonstrates accountability, thereby preserving integrity even in a context where hospitality is culturally expected.

Professional Boundaries and Self-Regulation

While Nwanne's theory legitimises certain forms of appreciation, it does not encourage indiscriminate acceptance of gifts. Instead, it calls for professional discernment and institutional safeguards. Media organisations must establish internal codes of conduct that define acceptable limits of hospitality. For example, a soft drink or transportation reimbursement may be reasonable, but a large sum of money, expensive gift, or favour that creates dependency clearly violates ethical boundaries.

Self-regulation remains the most effective mechanism for balancing courtesy and integrity. Journalists must cultivate what Nwanne terms "moral intelligence" — the ability to recognise when appreciation becomes inducement. By exercising restraint, transparency, and self-respect, practitioners can maintain ethical balance without alienating cultural sensibilities.

Scholarly and Professional Receptions

The concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality has provoked stimulating debate among communication scholars and practitioners. Supporters hail it as an innovative framework that contextualises African journalism ethics within its own moral philosophy. They argue that the approach restores dignity to journalists unfairly accused of corruption for accepting harmless gestures of appreciation.

Critics, however, caution that legitimising any form of gift may blur ethical boundaries and embolden unethical journalists to disguise bribery as hospitality. They fear that the theory could be misused by those seeking moral justification for corrupt behaviour. Nonetheless, Nwanne's intervention has compelled a critical rethinking of what constitutes ethical journalism in Africa. It invites educators, professional bodies, and regulators to refine ethical codes in ways that reflect both universal values and local realities.

Ethical Significance

At its core, Legitimate Media Hospitality is not an excuse for moral laxity but a call for ethical maturity. It challenges journalists to act with moral autonomy rather than blind conformity to foreign models. It also demands that society recognise the difference between gratitude and graft, between courtesy and corruption. By articulating this distinction, Nwanne contributes to the indigenisation of journalism ethics — transforming moral philosophy from imported dogma into a living practice rooted in African experience. Ultimately, the concept reinforces the central ethic of journalism: truth-telling with honour.

Ethical Implications and Professional Practice

Rethinking Journalistic Integrity

The introduction of Legitimate Media Hospitality into ethical discourse calls for a deeper interrogation of what constitutes journalistic integrity in the African context. Traditionally, journalistic integrity has been defined by strict objectivity, neutrality, and independence from all forms of material influence. Western media ethics, shaped by liberal democratic traditions, often posit that the acceptance of any gift compromises credibility. However, this rigid application ignores the moral pluralism that exists across societies.

In Nigeria and other African nations, the journalist operates in a socio-cultural milieu where human interactions are guided by communal values rather than individualistic codes. Thus, ethical practice cannot be divorced from the environment that shapes it. As Nwanne (2021) argues, true journalistic integrity is not about the rejection of every act of goodwill but about maintaining moral independence and fidelity to truth. Integrity resides not merely in the act of acceptance or refusal, but in the motivation and moral consciousness behind it.

Contextual Ethics and Moral Pragmatism

The ethical implications of Legitimate Media Hospitality can best be understood through the framework of contextual ethics — a moral approach that recognises the relevance of circumstances and cultural contexts in determining ethical behaviour. In this view, universal moral principles such as truthfulness, fairness, and accountability remain constant, but their application must consider local norms and realities. For instance, a token given to a journalist covering a rural community event, where hospitality is part of cultural protocol, cannot be judged by the same standards as a cash payment offered by a politician seeking favourable coverage during elections. Contextual ethics insists that morality is not absolute but relational — it depends on purpose, perception, and consequence. This approach aligns with moral pragmatism, which seeks a balance between idealism and reality. It acknowledges that journalists in developing economies often work under difficult financial conditions, where modest acts of hospitality may ease operational constraints without corrupting judgement. The challenge, therefore, is not to ban such acts but to guide them through ethical self-awareness and institutional regulation.

Institutionalising Ethical Guidelines

The institutionalisation of Legitimate Media Hospitality requires a deliberate effort by professional bodies and media organisations to develop clear, context-sensitive ethical guidelines. The Nigerian Press Council (NPC), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), and the Guild of Editors should consider revising their codes of ethics to incorporate culturally grounded provisions that clarify what constitutes acceptable hospitality. Such guidelines should, for instance, stipulate that journalists must not solicit or demand any form of gift before coverage. That appreciation received after coverage must be modest, voluntary, and unconnected to editorial decision-making. Moreover, any form of hospitality likely to create a sense of obligation or future expectation should be declined. In fact, media organisations should promote transparency by encouraging disclosure of gifts received during assignments.

By codifying these distinctions, the profession can curb abuse while protecting journalists from unfair moral condemnation. It also reinforces the principle that ethical journalism must evolve with society's values, not in isolation from them.

The Role of Media Organisations

Media organisations bear a critical responsibility in mediating between ethical ideals and professional realities. They should establish internal mechanisms such as:

- a.) Ethics Committees to evaluate borderline cases.
- b.) Training and orientation programmes on ethical decision-making.
- c.) Welfare schemes to improve journalists' economic conditions and reduce susceptibility to undue influence.

When journalists are poorly paid and lack institutional support, moral vulnerability increases. As Kasoma (1996) noted, "poverty is a moral test of integrity." Enhancing journalists' welfare is therefore not merely an administrative matter but an ethical imperative. It strengthens their independence and makes the acceptance of questionable gifts less tempting.

Media Hospitality and the Principle of Transparency

Transparency is the moral bridge that connects hospitality with professionalism. When a journalist openly acknowledges a token received and demonstrates that it does not influence their coverage, they affirm ethical accountability. In contrast, secrecy and concealment often breed suspicion.

Some global news organisations, such as the BBC and Reuters, already maintain disclosure policies that require journalists to report any gifts or complimentary items received in the course of duty. Nigerian media houses could adapt similar models, aligning them with local realities. By making hospitality transparent and subject to institutional scrutiny, the profession can dispel the cloud of moral ambiguity that currently surrounds such gestures.

Ethical Education and Reorientation

One of the most sustainable ways to integrate Legitimate Media Hospitality into professional ethics is through education. Schools of journalism and communication departments should incorporate the concept into their curricula, alongside traditional Western theories of media ethics. Students should be taught to differentiate between genuine appreciation and manipulative inducement, and to exercise moral judgement in real-world contexts.

Workshops, seminars, and continuous professional development programmes organised by the NUJ and other associations could further strengthen this moral consciousness. As Oso (2012) observed, “ethical reorientation is the first step towards restoring the dignity of journalism in Nigeria.” By educating journalists on culturally responsive ethics, the profession can bridge the gap between universal principles and indigenous practice.

Restoring Public Trust through Ethical Clarity

Public perception remains a critical dimension of this debate. For decades, the term ‘brown envelope’ has shaped negative stereotypes about journalists as easily bought or morally compromised. This perception undermines public trust, even when journalists act in good faith. By promoting the idea of Legitimate Media Hospitality and clearly defined, transparently managed, and institutionally regulated, journalists can reclaim moral credibility. The public must be educated to understand that not every gesture of appreciation is corruption. Ethical clarity fosters mutual respect: society learns to appreciate journalists’ integrity, while journalists uphold the trust placed in them.

Legitimate Media Hospitality does not dilute journalistic ethics; rather, it contextualises them. It invites journalists to exercise ethical discernment, organisations to develop adaptive codes, and the public to abandon simplistic moral binaries. The ethical implications, therefore, are both corrective and progressive — they correct the misrepresentation of journalists as habitual bribe-takers and advance the profession towards a culturally authentic model of integrity.

Implications of the Theoretical Integration

This theoretical fusion has several implications for journalism ethics in Nigeria and other African societies:

1. Moral Contextualisation: It promotes a culturally sensitive interpretation of ethics, recognising that moral behaviour must resonate with indigenous values.
2. Professional Accountability: It reaffirms that journalists are morally answerable both to their conscience (deontology) and to society (social responsibility).
3. Ethical Flexibility: It allows for a dynamic ethical framework that balances universal principles with local realities.
4. Restoration of Dignity: It defends journalists from blanket accusations of corruption, thereby restoring professional respectability.

By uniting these two frameworks, the paper underscores that ethical journalism in Africa must be both principled and contextual, guided by unchanging moral truths yet responsive to cultural particularities.

Challenges and Criticisms of Legitimate Media Hospitality

While Professor Ben Nwanne’s concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality offers a refreshing and culturally grounded approach to understanding journalistic ethics, it has not been without controversy. Scholars, practitioners, and media ethicists have raised a number of objections and concerns, ranging from the potential for abuse to the difficulty of distinguishing hospitality from bribery. This section examines the key challenges and criticisms surrounding the concept and discusses their implications for ethical journalism in Nigeria.

The Risk of Ethical Ambiguity

One of the foremost criticisms of Legitimate Media Hospitality is that it may create a grey area between ethical appreciation and unethical inducement. Critics argue that the concept, though well-intentioned, risks blurring the moral boundaries that separate legitimate gratitude from corrupt influence. Given the pervasive culture of patronage in Nigeria’s political and business environments, there is fear that unscrupulous journalists or news sources could easily exploit the theory to rationalise bribery. As Olatunji (2016) notes, “the danger of moral ambiguity lies in its potential to erode ethical vigilance.” When the line between right and wrong becomes blurred, ethical standards risk being diluted, and the credibility of the media may suffer. Without clear guidelines or institutional enforcement, what begins as hospitality could degenerate into habitual inducement, thereby undermining the very integrity the concept seeks to protect.

The Problem of Perception

Another major challenge relates to public perception. In societies where journalists are already viewed with suspicion, any association with financial or material gifts however innocent, can reinforce the negative stereotype of corruption. Public trust in the media is fragile, and perception often shapes credibility more powerfully than fact.

Even when journalists receive post-engagement tokens purely as appreciation, the public may still interpret such acts as bribery. As McQuail (2010) emphasises, “credibility is a social construct maintained by perception as much as by behaviour.” Hence, journalists who accept hospitality, even legitimately, must contend with the risk of being misunderstood. The challenge, therefore, is not only ethical but reputational: how to maintain professional dignity in an environment where moral intentions are often misjudged.

Economic Realities and Professional Temptations

Nigeria's media industry is marked by economic precarity, with many journalists earning low or irregular wages. This situation creates a fertile ground for ethical compromise. When a profession is poorly remunerated, the temptation to rationalise material gifts as “hospitality” increases. Critics argue that until the economic welfare of journalists improves, distinguishing between appreciation and inducement will remain problematic.

As Oso (2012) observes, “poverty is the most persistent enemy of ethical journalism.” Thus, the effectiveness of Legitimate Media Hospitality as a moral construct depends heavily on structural reforms — improved wages, fair employment conditions, and institutional support for journalists. Without these safeguards, the concept may inadvertently legitimise corruption under the guise of cultural appreciation.

Absence of Institutional Guidelines

A further challenge lies in the lack of formal institutional frameworks to regulate media hospitality. Most Nigerian media organisations lack written policies defining acceptable and unacceptable gifts. As a result, ethical decisions are left to individual discretion, which varies according to personal morality, professional experience, and situational judgment.

Without clear institutional rules, even well-meaning journalists may make inconsistent or poorly reasoned ethical choices. This absence of codified standards makes the profession vulnerable to external pressure and moral subjectivity. The Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) must therefore play proactive roles in developing policy frameworks that operationalise Legitimate Media Hospitality while setting enforceable boundaries.

The Slippery Slope Argument

Some ethicists reject Nwanne's concept on what is termed the ‘slippery slope’ argument. The fear that once gift-giving is legitimised, even within narrow limits, it becomes difficult to prevent its escalation. They argue that human behaviour is easily rationalised, and journalists might begin to normalise larger or more frequent forms of hospitality over time. As Ward (2015) cautions, “ethical flexibility without accountability is moral chaos.” Unless the concept is accompanied by strong self-regulatory mechanisms and ethical education, there is the danger that what begins as courtesy could evolve into corruption. Thus, the legitimacy of media hospitality must always be conditional, monitored, and transparently handled to prevent moral decay.

Cultural Relativism versus Universal Ethics

Another line of criticism concerns the tension between cultural relativism and universal ethical principles. While Nwanne's argument for Legitimate Media Hospitality draws strength from African cultural values of gratitude and reciprocity, critics contend that ethics in journalism should be universal rather than culture-bound. Truth, fairness, and independence are global values that should not be compromised in the name of cultural accommodation. Kasoma (1996), however, provides a mediating position by asserting that African ethics, such as Ubuntu, can coexist with universal principles as long as the core commitment to truth is maintained. Thus, the challenge is to balance respect for cultural context with adherence to global professional standards.

Potential for Abuse by News Sources

There is also concern that powerful individuals or institutions might exploit the notion of Legitimate Media Hospitality to exert subtle influence on journalists. Politicians, corporate executives, or public relations practitioners could strategically offer gifts or favours while claiming cultural justification. In such cases, the journalist's independence may be subtly eroded without overt coercion. As Nwanne (2021) himself acknowledges, the problem lies not in the act but in the intent behind

it. Therefore, journalists must be trained to exercise moral discernment — the capacity to distinguish genuine appreciation from manipulative courtesy. Media organisations should reinforce this discernment through mentorship and internal accountability systems.

In summary, the main challenges confronting Legitimate Media Hospitality include:

- i. The risk of ethical ambiguity, which could blur the line between appreciation and corruption;
- ii. Negative public perception, which may tarnish the image of journalists even when no wrongdoing occurs;
- iii. Economic vulnerability, which increases susceptibility to inducement;
- iv. Absence of institutional regulation, which breeds inconsistency in ethical practice;
- v. The slippery slope risk, leading to possible moral erosion; and
- vi. The potential for cultural misuse by both journalists and their sources.

Despite these criticisms, the concept remains intellectually valuable because it provokes renewed dialogue on how journalism ethics can evolve within African realities. The challenges identified here do not invalidate the idea but rather highlight the need for guardrails, education, and continuous ethical reflection.

Conclusion

The discourse on Legitimate Media Hospitality challenges long-standing assumptions about journalistic ethics within the African context. For decades, the public and even some scholars have viewed any material appreciation extended to journalists as a form of corruption — the infamous “brown envelope syndrome.” This blanket perception has not only stigmatised journalists but has also failed to acknowledge the complex interplay between culture, courtesy, and professionalism in African societies.

Professor Ben Nwanne’s proposition of Legitimate Media Hospitality therefore represents an attempt to decolonise media ethics to reinterpret Western moral frameworks through the lens of African social norms. His theory invites scholars and practitioners to reflect on how indigenous systems of gratitude, reciprocity, and appreciation can coexist with universal ethical principles such as truth, fairness, and independence.

In this paper, it has been established that journalism, by its nature, is a relational profession. Journalists engage with individuals and institutions in pursuit of information meant for public enlightenment. Often, such interactions occur within cultural spaces where appreciation and gift-giving are common social gestures. To construe all forms of such gestures as bribery is to impose a rigid, foreign ethical model that ignores Africa’s social dynamics. However, this does not suggest that ethics should be diluted. On the contrary, Legitimate Media Hospitality calls for a contextual redefinition of ethics, one that blends the moral rigour of Western deontology with the communal empathy of African moral philosophy. The responsibility, therefore, lies with journalists to uphold professional discipline, transparency, and accountability, ensuring that appreciation never mutates into inducement.

The theoretical frameworks adopted in this paper — the Social Responsibility Theory and Deontological Ethics — have demonstrated that moral acceptability depends not merely on the act itself, but on its intention, purpose, and impact. The former demands that journalists remain accountable to society by upholding truth and fairness, while the latter insists that duty and conscience must guide all professional decisions. Within this dual ethical lens, receiving a token of appreciation becomes legitimate only when it neither compromises editorial independence nor distorts factual accuracy. Furthermore, the paper has emphasised that the pathway to legitimising media hospitality lies in institutional regulation, ethical education, improved welfare, and public sensitisation. A profession that codifies its ethical boundaries, trains its members continuously, and promotes transparency will not only regain public trust but will also elevate journalism to its rightful place as a noble and culturally grounded calling.

In the broader African media landscape, the concept of Legitimate Media Hospitality offers a vital intellectual contribution to the ongoing search for Africanised media ethics. It reminds us that morality cannot be detached from culture, and that ethical universality must allow for contextual interpretation. By advancing this concept, African scholars are asserting that journalistic integrity can thrive within indigenous value systems rather than in opposition to them.

Finally, this paper concludes that ethical legitimacy in journalism is not determined by the absence of gifts but by the presence of integrity. A journalist guided by truth, conscience, and public interest cannot be corrupted by a token of hospitality. Conversely, one devoid of moral conviction will compromise ethics even without material inducement. The ultimate ethical safeguard, therefore, lies not in prohibition but in principled self-regulation.

In essence, Legitimate Media Hospitality should not be dismissed as a defence of ethical laxity, but rather embraced as a culturally relevant framework for moral reasoning in African journalism. If thoughtfully integrated into professional codes, educational curricula, and newsroom culture, it has the potential to redefine how journalists are perceived and how they perceive themselves — not as compromised actors, but as ethical professionals operating within their social and cultural realities.

The Way Forward and Recommendations

The debate surrounding Legitimate Media Hospitality is both necessary and timely, especially within the Nigerian media landscape, where ethical concerns and cultural realities often intersect. While the concept seeks to correct long-standing misconceptions about the financial interactions between journalists and news sources, it must be properly contextualised and institutionally regulated to avoid ethical pitfalls. The following recommendations provide a pragmatic path toward harmonising journalistic integrity with cultural appreciation.

i.) Institutionalisation of Ethical Guidelines

One of the foremost steps toward legitimising the concept is the development of institutional frameworks. Media organisations, professional bodies such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), and regulatory agencies like the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) should formulate clear policies defining what constitutes acceptable media hospitality. These policies should specify:

- a.) The nature and value of gifts that may be received;
- b.) The circumstances under which they are permissible; and
- c.) The procedure for declaring such gifts.

This will eliminate ambiguity and provide journalists with a clear ethical compass. An institutionalised framework will also reassure the public that gift acceptance is governed by professional standards rather than personal discretion.

ii.) Ethical Education and Continuous Professional Development

Ethical awareness must be reinforced through continuous professional education. Journalism training institutions should incorporate modules on Legitimate Media Hospitality and cultural ethics into their curricula. This would enable students and practitioners to critically examine the boundaries between appreciation and bribery within cultural contexts. Workshops, symposia, and public lectures organised by journalism departments, media houses, and professional associations should also emphasise situational ethics — the ability to apply moral reasoning in real-life reporting contexts. As Christians *et al* (2012) suggest, ethical training must go beyond theory to practical engagement with dilemmas that journalists routinely face.

iii.) Improved Welfare and Economic Security for Journalists

Ethical conduct cannot thrive in conditions of material deprivation. Low and irregular salaries remain one of the most significant threats to media integrity in Nigeria. To ensure that journalists are not compelled to rationalise questionable hospitality, media proprietors must improve welfare packages, ensure prompt payment of wages, and provide incentives for ethical reporting. As Oso (2012) aptly notes, ethical standards flourish where journalists are economically secure and professionally fulfilled. Thus, addressing the structural problem of poor remuneration is a prerequisite for sustaining ethical excellence in Nigerian journalism.

iv.) Establishment of Ethical Review Committees

Every major media organisation should establish an Ethical Review Committee (ERC) to evaluate ethical breaches and complaints. Such committees would not only ensure compliance with internal policies but also provide advisory opinions on borderline cases involving media hospitality. A journalist unsure whether a gift constitutes hospitality or bribery could confidentially consult the ERC for guidance. This institutionalised mechanism would promote accountability, transparency, and self-regulation within the profession.

v.) Promotion of Transparency and Public Accountability

Transparency is the antidote to suspicion. Journalists and media houses should adopt open practices that enhance public trust. For instance, when covering an event sponsored by a source who provides gifts or incentives, the journalist could disclose such relationships where relevant, as is the norm in advanced democracies. This practice, while still emerging in Africa, helps distinguish legitimate professional engagement from covert inducement. Public disclosure reassures audiences that editorial independence remains intact despite the exchange of courtesy.

vi.) Integration of Cultural Ethics into Professional Codes

The professional codes of ethics guiding Nigerian journalism such as the NUJ Code of Conduct and the Nigerian Press Organisation (NPO) Code should be revised to integrate cultural considerations without compromising universal values like truth, fairness, and independence. As Kasoma (1996) argues, African journalism should be “rooted in its cultural soil yet responsive to universal ethics.” Legitimate Media Hospitality aligns with this vision by recognising that appreciation and reciprocity are part of African social life. However, codification is necessary to ensure that cultural ethics reinforce, rather than undermine, journalistic integrity.

vii.) Collaboration Between Academia and the Media Industry

There is a need for closer collaboration between the academy and industry practitioners to further research and refine Nwanne's postulation. Universities should conduct empirical studies on journalists' perceptions, practices, and ethical dilemmas concerning hospitality. The findings can guide the development of realistic ethical standards that resonate with Nigeria's socio-cultural realities. Joint forums involving scholars, editors, reporters, and policymakers will ensure that ethical frameworks are not abstract but practical and adaptive. This academic-industry partnership will help transform Legitimate Media Hospitality from a theoretical concept into a widely accepted ethical paradigm.

x.) Sensitisation of the Public

A major barrier to the acceptance of Legitimate Media Hospitality is public misunderstanding. Therefore, media associations should embark on public enlightenment campaigns explaining the distinction between hospitality and bribery. By sensitising audiences, the profession can rebuild public confidence and reduce the stigma associated with journalists receiving gifts. Such campaigns should highlight that ethical journalism is defined not by the mere act of receiving a gift, but by whether the journalist's independence and fairness are compromised.

xi.) Strengthening of Internal Accountability Systems

Beyond policies and education, accountability must be embedded within newsroom culture. Editors and newsroom managers should monitor how reporters interact with sources, particularly in contexts where hospitality is extended. Periodic ethical audits can help assess compliance and identify emerging risks. The presence of strong editorial oversight ensures that Legitimate Media Hospitality does not become an excuse for moral laxity. Instead, it becomes a framework for dignified and transparent engagement between journalists and newsmakers.

xii.) Encouraging Self-Discipline and Personal Integrity

Ultimately, ethical journalism is anchored on individual moral strength. No amount of policy or institutional regulation can substitute for personal integrity. Journalists must cultivate an internalised sense of responsibility. The conviction that public trust is sacred and must not be betrayed for material gain. As Ward (2015) contends, the conscience remains the journalist's final gatekeeper. Therefore, while hospitality may be legitimate, it must never compromise the journalist's independence, fairness, or commitment to truth.

Precisely, the pathway to legitimising media hospitality lies in a holistic approach that combines ethical codification, professional education, improved welfare, transparency, and cultural sensitivity. The goal is not to discard the concept but to refine it within an institutional and moral framework that promotes both integrity and appreciation. If properly regulated and ethically practised, Legitimate Media Hospitality can serve as a bridge between culture and professionalism, offering a uniquely African contribution to global media ethics.

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