

Q&A's on Nigeria's image in the media

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A few days ago, prominent Nigerians and communications experts gathered at a forum in Lagos to examine and proffer solutions to challenges facing the country's image.

"Why is the image of Nigeria important?" With that rhetorical question, Senator Ike Nwachukwu, a former military general and a two-time foreign affairs minister, kick-started a robust debate on what constitutes an image for Nigeria and how the media can be a veritable tool in projecting it. Nwachukwu alongside other professionals in the fields of brand and marketing, public relations, advertising and the media, had converged at the 50th birthday lecture of Yomi Badejo-Okusanya, the managing director, CMC Connect Ltd Lagos.

Managing Nigeria's image

Nwachukwu, who was the lead speaker at the event, set the tone for the discussion as he examined the topic, 'Managing of Nigeria's Image: Whose responsibility?' In his appraisal, the former presidential candidate in 2003 election said Nigeria's image had undergone profound transformations in the last five decades but which at every point in time is dictated by two important factors: the country's political decision-making and her economic power.

"The answer to our question comes sharply into view: our leadership (to a lesser extent, the followership- the people and family) has always been responsible for making Nigeria's image due to the fact that it engages in political decision-making on behalf of the country and it manages the nation's economy, thereby determining the degree of its economic power at any particular time, as well as the kind of image, positive or negative, that Nigeria had both at home and abroad," Nwachukwu said.

In his estimation, Nigeria's image has pummeled in recent times due to corruption, and insecurity of lives and property. He said corruption in Nigeria has become quite pervasive in all Nigerian institutions because the leadership group seems to be promoting material self-interest to the detriment of the collective wellbeing. He added that the recurring insurgency is gradually spiraling from being a major national to international threat. And if the twin challenges are to be tackled, Nwachukwu recommended that both Nigerian leadership and the media should make concerted efforts to promote a positive image for the country.

Media must protect the country's image

"The Nigerian media need to examine their strategy regarding the laundering of our image. It is true that the media are to inform the general public, and mould public opinion, but, they must do so with the aim of protecting the image of our country. I am not asking for cover ups, but publications that impact negatively or ridicule our country and its citizenry, should not be made. Do not cover criminality, but avoid painting Nigeria with a tar brush," Nwachukwu said.

The elder statesman wasn't the only one to take the media to task. The minister of information and strategy, Labaran Maku represented by Kingsley Osadolor, was even more frontal. He accused a certain section of the media of deliberately not appreciating anything good in the current administration even as he said the ministry is doing all it can to project the nation, positively.

Maku cited what he called the ministry's urgent approach to curtail excesses of Boko Haram insurgents whom he accused of trying to undermine government businesses. He said his ministry employed the services of influential northerners who have so far helped to douse the tension and also prevented Nigeria from been launched on religious warpath.

Rebranding Nigeria

For Prof Dora Akunyili, the immediate past minister of information and communication, the world has a very negative perception about Nigeria. This she believed is being foisted on the country by the international community, a trend she said was assiduously fought through her rebranding Nigeria project while in office.

"When I assumed office as the chief image maker of Nigeria in December 2008, I decided that the negative perception about Nigeria by the international community needed to be addressed. This is because if we do not take any concrete effort to address our image problem, the situation will continue to get worse, and Nigerians will not only be ridiculed as a people, but investors will also be discouraged from coming to invest in the country," Akunyili said.

On his part, Akinlolu Akinwunmi, managing director/chief executive officer, Prima Garnet Communications, chairman, Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) decried a situation whereby the foreign media have had to play up bad incidences in Nigeria while giving little or no attention to good deeds. He observed that there is no nation on earth where Nigerians are not playing active roles in the socio-economic drive.

"Nigerians are educated. There are many Nigerian lecturers abroad. There are countries where Nigerians are the ones educating their people. There is hardly any nation on earth you visit without meeting a Nigeria surgeon. In terms of peace-keeping, Nigerian army is the best. Their expertise surpasses that of the United States of America and yet most of the foreign media will only pay attention to issues of 419, kidnapping and Boko Haram insurgency," Akinwunmi said.

According to Akinwunmi, it makes lots of senses for government to give priority to the nation's image as it is the only way the country can be taken serious. He said he was an active player in the defunct "rebrand Nigeria" project championed by Prof. Akunyili, regretted how laudable initiatives put in place at the time were frustrated due to lack of funds. Akinwunmi also urged the government to co-opt Nigerians in laundering the nation's image, saying any policy on image laundering that excluded the Nigerian populace will surely fail.

Every Nigerian is responsible

But taking a slightly different position, Muhammed Abdullahi, president of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) said Nigeria image laundering project is a responsibility of every Nigerian, but there must be orderliness in the hierarchy or responsibility. For him, the task of rebranding Nigeria shouldn't be made all comers affairs.

Abdullahi represented by Willy Ogbidi, Director of NIPR School Lagos, took a swipe at the increasing number of uncertified Public Relations Practitioners, insisting that their acts have done much damage to the profession and indeed to Nigeria as a country. He insisted that there is a strong connection between Nigerian battered image and quacks engaging in public relations practice. He added that NIPR is already working with relevant agencies of government and that will devise an approach such that those who are not certified to practice the profession will be arrested and prosecuted.

Perception is key

Also contributing, Seni Adetu, the managing director of Guinness Nigeria Plc represented by Adrienne Nwagu, head of sustainability and responsibility, said in creating acceptable brand for the country, Nigerian leaders must take cognizance of the fact that perception is key. He advised that if there is any better way to shore up the nation's image, the leaders must start addressing critical issues like corruption and insecurity of lives and property.

Chairman and Publisher Guardian newspaper, Lady Alex Ibru however spoke in the defence of Nigerian media, saying it was an unfair assessment on the part of certain speakers to blame Nigerian media solely for the nation's poor image. According to Ibru, no Nigerian media house will deliberately set out to ridicule Nigeria.

"Somewhere along the line in the discussion, Nigerian media were being castigated for the nation's poor image based on their reportage. Let me say emphatically here that there is no media house in this country, except those who practice gutter press which you see all over the places, that was deliberately set up to ridicule Nigeria. We are the voice of the people. We are the watchdog of the society and we are meant to report issues the way they are without sparing anybody," Ibru said.

But in a swift reaction, former minister of Information and Communication, Prof. Akunyili said they were not out to attack Nigerian media but simply saying there are better ways Nigerian media could manage information. She recognised the press for helping Nigeria secure independence in 1960 just as she credited them for chasing the military away.

In a brief remark, the celebrant of the day, Badejo-Okusanya said he was happy that rather than marking his 50th birthday ceremony with needless fanfare he has succeeded in charting a course for the nation, especially as it affects her image and perception. He noted that this is the first time Nigeria communication practitioners and other stakeholders will gather to discuss the issue of managing Nigeria's image vis-a-vis the challenges (and opportunities) it currently presents.

"Since we are into marketing communication field and the issue of Nigerian image is largely a communication management issue, it will only be appropriate that we mark an occasion like this with a topical issue of this nature. Our conviction is that, in the long run, something drastic will be done to shore up the nation's image" Badejo-Okusanya said.

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