

**Keynote Speech by the DG NBC Malam Balarabe Shehu Ilelah
during the Annual Conference of the Association of
Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN)
2022
August 31, 2022 at Rock View Hotel, Abuja**

Protocols

It is my pleasure to serve as a keynote Speaker at this all-important opening ceremony of the Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN) 9th Annual Conference. It is really an honour to address erudite scholars who epitomize scholarship, accomplished communication gurus and highly internationally-acclaimed distinguished academics whose contributions traverse nooks and crannies.

The theme of this year's conference "**Communication, Media, and Power Relations in a Multicultural Society**", is quite apt and I hope scholars will do justice to it by x-raying and critically discuss the power relations between the media and the political elite, particularly within the context of struggles to control communication infrastructure by power players to influence media narratives based on predisposed viewpoints, in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual Nigeria.

Permit me to also commend the organizers of this conference for choosing a sub-theme which features scholars and veterans in a special panel to discuss a burning issue that is affecting Nigeria. I also hope they will do

justice to the topic “One Country, Many Voices, Dilemmas of Free Expression”.

The topic is so central now that our political gladiators and the media itself, ‘ethnicize’, ‘regionalize’ and ‘religionize’ issues so deep, to the extent of threatening the existential foundation of Nigeria. This is coming at a time when our country faces security challenges which poses another threat to our peaceful corporate co-existence.

Nigeria, with a diverse culture, hundreds of ethnic groups, the most populous black nation and the leading African country is blessed with over 200 million people and numerous natural resources spread across the breaths and lengths of the country. Each of the ethnic groups has a distinct language, custom, values and even mode of communication.

NBC has so far issued over 1000 licenses, out of which 684 are functional. These broadcast stations are free to express views, opinion and positions of Nigerians. But such freedoms can face limitations when it borders on the issues of hate speech, fake news, misinformation, disinformation and other incendiary broadcasts.

It is unfortunate that, the Nigerian citizens including the media have at various instances failed to galvanize the multi-cultural opportunities of the country for unity in diversity. This has led to serial communal, socio-political, ethnic and religious conflicts in virtually all parts of the country. The level of tolerance and agility to build a united Nigeria is becoming weak daily. This has given impetus to our political office-seekers to make the issue of one Nigeria, a point of campaign and one of the leading campaign agenda.

With these challenges, invited guests, revered scholars, ladies and gentlemen, some section of our broadcasters avail their platforms to unscrupulous elements to fan the embers of hatred and disunity in gross violations of the objectives of broadcasting as encapsulated in the *Nigeria Broadcasting Code*. Several instances abound where broadcasters were found to have provocatively adulate and hype the activities of restive outlawed groups, banditry, insurgency, cattle-rustling, farmer-herder clashes, kidnappings, youth restiveness, crimes and other social vices.

To safeguard the Nigeria's multicultural position, the *Nigeria Broadcasting Code* bans any form of offensive reference or ridicule to any group of people based on their ethnic origin, religion or political leanings. It has also bans broadcasters from using their medium for any personal or sectional interest. The Code has also proscribed programs that contain anything which compromises the unity or corporate existence of Nigeria as an indivisible entity.

Invited guests, distinguished academics, ladies and gentlemen, in spite of the provisions of the Code, and the need to promote peace and development journalism for a multicultural Nigeria, some media outfits which should ordinarily and professionally play a key role in addressing the challenges confronting us, they sometimes show indifference and aggravate the situation through unnecessary hyping without recourse to due impartiality and social responsibility.

While journalists are constitutionally and ethically encouraged to offer a wide range of views and divergent opinions in a multicultural setting like Nigeria,

such should be done with caution when our oneness as a nation is being threatened. In times like this, media is required to guard against glorification and are legally obligated to assist the security agencies by disclosing certain information to them as soon as reasonably practicable, from their interviews with terror actors and from their observations from terror scenes. This is in line with the public and national interest principles.

Section 39(1) of the 1999 Constitution is very clear about how every person is guaranteed **freedom of expression**, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. But, that right, was not without some constitutional limitations. In view of this, broadcasters are allowed to avail their platforms to people to partake in discourse that will enrich the life of the citizenry but in accordance with the law and without offending the sensibilities and sensitivities of our diversity.

At this juncture, permit me to appeal to our communication scholars to continue to instill in our upcoming journalists the spirit of critical review of issues and the need to always weigh the consequences a particular reportage might have, particularly on the gullible public on one hand and the overall public interest on the other. This will encourage them to ethically weigh the benefits and the degree of moral and psychological harms and offence likely to be caused by inclusion or exclusion of any interview or pictorial material in their journalistic undertakings. They should note that, the days of sensational journalism or yellow journalism have long been passed.

Invited guests, ladies and gentlemen, another cancerous challenge, which some broadcasters fall prey of, is fake news and hate speech which also

have attendant consequences on the security of the country. Our monitoring reports suggest that we must rise up to defeat the incursion squarely or it will consume us all. The emerging technologies and digital platforms particularly social media give ample opportunity for instant information sharing, and have made it possible for citizen journalism.

The National Broadcasting Commission views this development as a positive one as it has added value to the concept of freedom of expression. As citizens provide instantaneous eye-witness account of daily events, cautions should be exercised particularly about the editorial judgment and verifiability of the shared information. Therefore, each User-Generated Content must be vetted and verified by the broadcasters who have the editorial judgment. These are deliberately done to safeguard the diversity of Nigeria.

Our journalists should know that, the 'public right to know' on which notion they mostly produce offensive content, is limited by section 45 (1) (a&b) of the Nigeria's 1999 Constitution which restricts freedom of expression and freedom of the public to know in the interest of "defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health; or for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons".

The good news ladies and gentlemen, is that, our diversity is our strength. We should help in keeping it. I therefore challenge ACSPN to help the broadcast industry by commissioning comprehensive national studies on:

1. Diversity in broadcast content in Nigeria
2. Usage of local languages for broadcasting in Nigeria

These two important issues are crucial in promoting cross-cultural and intercultural communication which I feel can engender national unity, cohesion and integration. There is also need to further sensitize our broadcasters about inculcating in the people of Nigeria the spirit of tolerance of all shades of opinions within the ambits of the law.

Distinguished participants, let me use this opportunity to request for the support of ACSPN in our effort to establish an Institute called the ***Nigeria Broadcast Institute (NBI)*** for the broadcast industry, which we hope will further professionalize the industry. With the collaboration of the Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON), the Institute plans to train and issue certificates to prospective broadcasters whereas BON will register them as certified members of the industry.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, before I conclude, I am glad to inform you that because of the premium NBC places on this conference, I have directed all our Research Officers to not only attend this conference but register as members of ACSPN. And, they are all here with the Director Broadcast Policy and Research.

I also wish to inform you that, NBC will soon commence amendments to the 6th Edition of the *Nigeria Broadcasting Code*. I therefore, call on the academic community to submit memoranda on areas they feel need review, particularly those that deal with our diversity and multicultural outlook.

Thank you very much for your attention.

