

A PRESENTATION BY NDI MUH BERTRAND SHANCHO ON THE OCCASION OF THE 31ST EDITION OF WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY ON THE THEME: A PRESS FOR THE PLANET; JOURNALISM IN THE FACE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS, AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BUEA, MAY 3, 2024.

VC
HoD
Lecturers
ASJUB/Executives
Students
Distinguished Guests
Ladies & Gentlemen...

It gives me great pleasure and indeed quite an honour to be back again in this great Department that contributed enormously to who I am today, close to 13 years after. I am obsessed with joy today to meet my lecturers (Che Tita, Kingsley Ngange, Diffang Funge, Divine Besong etc.). A story is told of a Professor who intentionally missed his flight when he learnt that the plane he boarded was produced by some of his students. My presence here today is an eloquent testimony to the fact that the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication in the University of Buea is proud of its products.

Introduction

It is a humbling feeling to have been invited by the Association of Student Journalist in the University of Buea (ASJUB) of the JMC Department to be the Guest Speaker of 31st edition of the World Press Freedom Day commemorated the world over today May 3, 2024, on the theme: A Press for the Planet; Journalism in the Face of the Environmental Crisis. World Press Freedom Day, which we are celebrating today, is a very important day in the global media landscape. It is that day that recognizes the crucial role of a free and an independent media in any functioning democracy; a day that journalism trade unions and associations across the globe leverages to create awareness on the importance of press freedom and to protect journalists who are at risk of violence, imprisonment, or censorship. Since the institution of World Press Freedom Day by the United Nation in 1993, the Day has always been commemorated on a theme, which helps to raise awareness of global issues affecting journalists and the practice of journalism that might otherwise go unnoticed. The theme of each year has often also provided a platform for media men and women and other organizations and associations to coordinate their efforts and collaborate on addressing these issues.

The theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day: A Press for the Planet; Journalism in the Face of the Environmental Crisis, has come at an opportune moment. It is a call for student journalists and journalists like you and I to pay attention more than ever before to planet earth (our only home) and the numerous environmental crises that are claiming lives every other day. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres' in his message at the sixth United Nations Environment Assembly that took place in Nairobi-Kenya from February 26 to March 1, 2024, said; "Our planet is on the brink. Ecosystems are collapsing. Our climate is imploding. And humanity is to blame. The fallout from poisoned rivers to rising seas harms us all". Planet earth, our only home is indeed in a serious crisis. We are currently plunged in what many people term the "triple planetary crisis—climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

The Environmental Crisis

There is just no way we can talk about "journalism in the face of environmental crisis" without looking at some of the **environmental crisis affecting us everyday!**

CLIMATE CHANGE: The devastating impact of the deteriorating climate is not a distant threat; its

effects are being felt everywhere across the country with an estimated 320,000 Cameroonians affected yearly by climate disasters like floods, landslides, water, and food crisis etc., according to Cameroon's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). Last year the city of Limbe, Buea and Mbankomo in the South West and Centre regions of Cameroon respectively were hit by floods and landslides that killed over 50 persons and affected over 2500 others. The story of 10-year-old Mojimmbo Nathaniel Eyole is still very fresh in my memory. This child left home for school to exercise his right to education, and like every other child, went out to play and was swept away by flood, a climate-induced disaster. He was only discovered dead, 1 day after. This could have been your brother, nephew or son. That is not all! Higher temperatures and climate variability are drying off potable water sources, affecting agricultural productions and posing health risks like asthma complications, heart attacks, heart failure, malaria, meningitis and conjunctivitis amongst others. A lot of these climate disasters are either reported just once by most of us journalists (when government officials visit the scene) or not reported at all!

POLLUTION: The truth is that the waste we throw away daily, never really go away. A good quantity of them end up blocking our drainage and sewage systems, resulting in deadly floods. Some of the plastic wastes for example simply break into smaller pieces end up in our systems through our eating and breathing habits. Statistics show that an average person eats 70,000 micro plastics each year, this means that an average person consumes close to 200 micro plastics per day. This contributes tremendously to the many deadly diseases we have in Cameroon today like diabetes, cancer, birth defects, liver problem and other ailments. Recent figures from the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment indicate that about 400,000 to 1 million people die yearly in developing countries, including Cameroon, due to poor waste management-related diseases. This is equivalent to one person dying after every 30 seconds from unsustainable waste management. Is this not crucial enough to warrant adequate and consistent media coverage on this issue? There is also biodiversity loss and other environmental crises that environmental actors have been grappling with over the years.

Journalism Amidst Environmental Crisis

Journalists have a great role to play in reversing these planetary crises. The theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day demonstrates the desire of the United Nations to leverage the power of the press in fighting against the deadly environmental crisis that the world is plunged in. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in The Agenda Setting Theory of 1972 posit that the media does not just report on the news, it actually shapes public perception and priorities. By investigating and reporting on illegal logging, mining, trafficking and wanton deforestation activities, constructions on wetlands and waterways, pollution by different companies etc. we (journalists) can help raise public awareness, build public support and encourage action to stamp out environmental crimes and protect our planet.

By reporting on environmental policies and practices, exposing corruption and wrongdoing by governments and corporations that harm the environment, we (journalists) can also hold governments and corporations accountable and prompt positive changes for our environment. For example, On July 20, 2020, President Paul Biya of Cameroon signed to the agreement on the conservation of gorillas and their habitats. On July 22, 2020, barely two days after, a Prime Ministerial Decree was issued approving the logging of some 68,385 hectares of the Ebo Forest, a 2,000 km² proposed national park in the Littoral Region of Cameroon, home to gorillas and other endangered species. Some national media house (Voice of Nature News and Magazine, Planet Rise of Canal 2), international media houses and environmental non-profit organizations launched a widespread online condemnation and petition, and by August 2020, the Prime Minister signed a degree revoking the logging concessions.

Addressing the global climate and environmental crisis requires accurate, independent, and accessible journalism that can inform the public debate, clearly highlight the public interest, and protect those most affected by the planetary crisis. Just like any other niche, producing such journalism, is fraught with risks. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) environmental journalists who report on illegal activities like logging, mining, wildlife trafficking, and corruption face significant threats. Global Witness report, more than 2,000 environmentalists have been killed in the last ten years. As journalists leverage the power of the media to promote environmental sustainability, all hands must be put on deck to ensure their safety and access to data.

Recommendations for Effective Environmental Journalism

Understand the science and undergo mentorship. Journalists should attend webinars, workshops, take crash courses on environmental reporting, They can also minor in the Environmental Science Department or volunteer/intern in environmental media houses, while hoping that environmental reporting courses and programmes will be introduced in our journalism training schools and departments. **“Success is when opportunity meets preparedness”**. Lack of specialized training in environmental reporting and environmental science is the reason many journalists often ignore complicated environmental stories altogether or, if they attempt them, the results are sometimes less than satisfactory for readers.

Collaborate and Grow Together. Journalists should shun the win-it-all-alone mentality that has eaten deep into the landscape. They must collaborate and complement skills and knowledge set in environmental reporting for the greater good and much bigger impact for the planet.

An Environmental Journalist, Chow, said “I think the key is not to try learning everything by ourselves, because we can't. It's all about building connections and collaborating with people with different skills and perspectives.” After all, it is often said if you want to go fast go alone, but if you must go far, go with people”.

Leverage available opportunities. Accuracy and objectivity in reporting environmental crimes, like every other journalism beat requires financial independence. Environmental journalism remains one of those fields where this can easily be achieved. There are several grants and fellowships available that journalists can leverage to report on environmental issues accurately and objectively. Environmental Journalism network offers grants from \$2000 to \$20000, Mongabay Reporting Fellowship offers \$500 plus mentorship and training, National Geographic Society offers \$20000 for environmental photography and storytelling etc.

Conclusion

The theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day is very historic! Planet earth remains our only home. It provides us with sun, food, water, air, soil, forests and all necessary for our very existence and survival. We enjoy its beautiful mountains, air, lakes, rivers, deserts, and use its resources to construct the buildings and infrastructure that give us comfort. Our ecological malpractices have caused devastating landslides, droughts, floods, diseases, climate change, poor crop yields and famine amongst others. It is time to effect change! It is time to use the power in our pens, microphones and cameras to advocate for changes and improve the quality of the air, water, wildlife and natural resources. It is time to use the power in our media outlets to build a greener, safer and more sustainable planet that we will all enjoy and also hand to the next generation. The time is now!

God bless ASJUB, God Bless JMC, God Bless UB, God Bless you all!

Thank you!