

**WELCOME ADDRESS BY CHIMA IBENECHÉ, MANAGING DIRECTOR,
NIGERIA LNG LIMITED, AT THE TRAINING FOR JOURNALISTS IN
RIVERS STATE, ON 13TH JULY 2009, AT EKO HOTEL LAGOS**

"Our business is facts. We have learned to search for facts, to dig for the meaning of facts, to relate facts to each other, to analyse them and put them in perspective. We've learned too that a social movement, a change in lifestyle, a trend in music or art or an emotion spreading among the people can be as real a fact as a speech or a parade".

--- A. M. Rosenthal, former Executive Editor of New York Times.

I must confess that I hold written words in awe, for though their writers may die and pass away, their words have a high chance of passing on to generations unborn. The written word provides us the context to understand the present and the future. And for those who write history as it is being made, I have a special respect. How I have longed to know what the world of my ancestor's really was before the big bang encounter with the Europeans. Imagine if they had journalists; imagine if they had you.

So I have tried my hand at writing, publishing my first newspaper article in 1973 in the **Daily Times**. But fate has steered my course to a different path, however I have tried to keep pace with what is being written and hope that I can be regarded as, as an active observer or what lawyers would call *amicus curiae* (friend of the court). This is the basis of my address to you this morning. I speak today as a friend of journalism.

From my distance, I have admired journalism because it is the only profession that has a constitutional backing for its role. Not even the lawyers, practically the owners of the Nigerian Constitution were so honoured, unless you narrowly or erroneously read the "right to fair hearing" to mean support for practice of law. It is not. In the same manner as the bill on Freedom of Information Act is not meant for journalists. Promoting that bill as tool for journalism, rather than as a major plank for openness, transparency, good governance and the guarantee for democracy has been its greatest Achilles heels.

Amongst the many gifts journalism and journalists have given to this great country are Independence - the leading lights of that campaign were journalists - fight against military rule and corruption, and improved literacy. Nigeria arguably has the freest press in Africa, and some of the best writers and journalists in the world, as evidenced by the huge haul of awards, prizes and recognitions they bring home yearly from around the globe.

During the military rule, an era characterised by all sorts of aberrations, the press, it was, that became the catalyst for change. President Ibrahim Babangida, a veteran of several coups in Nigeria, was once famously quoted as saying that the press prepare the grounds for military coups. In other words, the press was political party, voters and arbiter rolled into one. A role it played so diligently that no government was able to get an unconstitutional third term. These are facts of the Nigerian situation.

At the level of theory, the press is a watchdog, a guardian of public morals, a defender of the masses, and tormentor of the oppressors. In the immortal words of **Mr. Lade Bonuola**, former MD of *The Guardian* and Publisher of the defunct *Comet* Newspapers:

"A quality newspaper...must be seen to be living above the society, not at par with it or below it. If below it, it will drag the society down, drawing up low values for it and stimulating thoughts to accept those values as the standard value. If it is at par with society, it cannot uplift that society. It will not place before it intrinsic values and challenges. It will not set goals for the society. A quality newspaper must dream dreams and set high standards for the society."

Let me also add that the media in a modern society not only has to live above society, it must recognise that it sets the agenda on public discourse. What the world discusses in the next week will be largely driven by what **CNN**, **The Economist**, the newswires and of course Nigerian press and media chose to write or talk about. For me the power to set agenda demands ideology (point of view) and commitment to greater good - hence the need to live above society.

These are high-minded rules to live by and be guided by. But the question is: are we? How come we have great journalists, but not world-class media? Why are our performances so uneven? We have the biggest population in Africa and one of the lowest newspaper circulation figures. We have a long history of brave and noble journalism and a long history of premature deaths of journals; we honour journalism and despise journalists. What really is going on? Why so many ironies?

Today, I ask the questions, usually, you ask and I answer. Are we setting the right agenda for Nigeria? Oh! Thank God that yesterday in one of the papers, I read an analysis on how expensive Nigerian democracy has become, consuming some 80% of our resources. Are we writing enough about education and healthcare? Are we placing the searchlight on the right role models? Or are we guilty of reporting only the big men of our times? Are we able to make complex subjects accessible to the ordinary person – how can democracy survive if we don't?

One undeniable fact is that newspapers in Nigeria need a new business model, not just because newspapers everywhere in the world are losing sales and advertisement revenue to the Internet, but mostly because the current business model serves nobody's interest.

The current business model does not serve the interest of the publishers, the journalists, and certainly not those of millions of people, including below-the-line workers and all those who are not in journalism, but whose livelihood are dependent on a thriving journalism industry.

It is sad that in a country where the *Sunday Times* sold 500, 000 copies daily in the 1980s that no 'national' newspaper sells more than 100, 000 copies daily, something *The Sowetan*, a city newspaper in South Africa does with ease in Soweto and suburbs. This is not withstanding that Nigeria's population has tripled since that glorious era to the current 140 million people and Lagos alone has some 8 - 10 million inhabitants. This is a huge market by every stretch. And a buoyant one!

For anybody who can find a way to collect his money, this is the market to be. Ask the mobile telephone operators who found the magic wand through PAY AS YOU GO.

Purchasing power is up, literacy is up, and democracy has got us talking again, so what's the problem? Without prejudice to what we shall be told here by our Pulitzer laureate and other journalism bigwigs, I shall like to make an informed guess; that the problem is with the **lack resonance** between the stories and the real challenges facing Nigerians; the suspicion that the press and the "big men" of our time have found a comfortable compromise.

The time to reinvent Nigerian newspapers is now. The industry needs a similar revolution as the banking sector to make journalism as equally attractive.

I dare say that the time for this restructuring is now, when journalists and journals around the globe are discussing change; when good and notable publications are experimenting with change.

Time and **Newsweek** magazines are currently undergoing massive changes. Are **Tell**, **Newswatch**, **The News**, and other magazine market leaders doing same? Time and Newsweek embarked on changes to make their bottom lines more respectable. *Time's* advertising revenue dropped by 27 per cent; and *Newsweek's* by 25 per cent last year. There is an intense struggle to stay afloat.

The easy lesson is that quality wins. *The Economist's* advertising revenue grew by a remarkable 25 percent last year, a jump pundits attributed to superior quality. **The Economist**, a free-market, right of centre publication is the only medium that can, perhaps, match the often irreverent and sanctimonious opinions of the Nigerian newspaper columnists.

The difference however is mostly in quality. While the opinions in *The Economist* are researched and carefully distilled, those of our writers are sometimes shoddy with thin research supporting smug hypothesis. How much value are Nigerian newspapers adding to our lives? Can we say for certain that we have reporters who deliver stories that put people ahead of bureaucracy; reporters who write stories that look deep into the heart of the community and answer plaguing questions about crime,

poverty, business and government accountability; reporters who know their subjects so well that they can shame the practitioners in a contest?

Competent newspapers help you to understand your environment, council, state, region, the people, their values, their dreams, hopes and aspirations. Are today's newspapers doing these? Newspapers elsewhere produce league tables of schools, hospitals, hotels, services. These forms basis for their ratings and rankings and gives everyone a basis for comparison.

Finally, we have been asked by many people, mostly journalists why Nigeria LNG Limited is interested in promoting writers and journalists. My first thought, usually, is why not?

I have many answers, but the simplest and most honest—that we are desirous of helping to create a better Nigeria — by far remains my best. We do not think that we really need a special reason to train journalists.

Every company operates within a legal-socio-political framework or environment. Nigeria LNG Limited is a proud Nigerian company and would do everything it can to make Nigeria a better place.

It is therefore my pleasure to welcome you to this ceremony.

Thank you for your time and patience

Chima Ibeneche
MD/CEO
Nigeria LNG Limited