

Press Union of Liberia Activity Report

2010 - 2013

Introduction

Since our first congress at the Baptist Seminary in Monrovia three years ago, so much has happened – for better or for worse in the media landscape in Liberia. The media played an important role in seeing our country through its second successive post-war elections, notwithstanding the far from satisfactory overall performance.

After ten years of no war, the media in Liberia is still very much in transition as the larger society.

We can rightly boast of media pluralism because there are over three dozen (daily, weekly, bi-weekly and other sporadic) newspapers in print, with a growing number of them maintaining their own printing houses and websites. Radio stations are stretching to over two dozen, excluding community radio stations currently put at 58 across the country. While television stations are now half a dozen.

Despite these encouraging developments, the media remains heavily challenged ethically and threatened externally, occasioned by the ownership interests, poor economy and condition of service for journalists and the repressive legal environment; hence, the continuing struggle for press freedom.

Liberia has at least three universities offering mass communication degree to students [some of whom are journalists], in addition to the dozens of short-term training programs for practitioners by various media development groups, but the application of professional standards remain a drawback.

This is the threat that must be confronted internally through a strong self-regulatory regime to get journalists take responsibility for their errors. We spent a better part of our term at the Union using the Media Complaints Committee to call the attention of journalists to the code of ethics, because in the true sense of journalism, it is only through adherence to code of ethics and conduct that we can draw a line between who a real journalist is.

Some of our advocacy landed on fertile grounds. The constitutional guarantee for free speech and press freedom was given significant effect by the enactment of the Freedom of Information legislation in 2010. The signing of Table Mountain Declaration in 2012 was also an important milestone towards greater guarantees for media freedom, but it still seems a pipeline dream when the laws in the statues that are barriers to free expression and press freedom will be repealed. We must insist on removing them because even on the eve of a consultative meeting convened by the Ministry of Information on October 11, 2013, for the repeal of those laws, the government was charging protesters with sedition. This does not show any good faith.

The current political environment presents a measure of openness in the governance process. But one cannot lose sight of the reality that politicians and vested interest always sleep on the same bed. This is manifested in the intermittent interferences and efforts to control the media through advertising dollars and power.

Evidently, in spite of the Government's expressed, and sometime overstated, commitment to press freedom and free expression, we have seen a number of recurring attacks and threats against the media with impunity. We must strengthen our solidarity on these issues to call the attention of the authorities so as not to undermine the selective tolerance our people have been offered.

Considering the above, it is safe to suggest that the Liberian media requires a continual engagement in the areas of media reforms, training, institutional capacity building, professional standards and the broader issue of professional development to effectively contribute to the process of national renewal.

No organization has been so firm than the Press Union of Liberia in the fight for basic freedoms and social justice in our country. We must pride ourselves. But we cannot afford any shift in that vision at any time in our history regardless of who runs our country. This is our challenge and together, we shall remain on the side of press freedom, free speech and democracy.

The following narrative is thus the report of projects executed in the last three years, spontaneous activities undertaken in defense of journalists, as well as statements issued on the promotion and protection of free speech and media freedom in Liberia.

Peter Quaqua
President

1.0 Projects Executed/Training

1.1 Elections and Political Reporting Training for Liberia Journalists (2010)

Training is the centerpiece of the administration's program and policy. This grows out of the capacity building problems facing media persons and institutions in the country. Our administration made use of every opportunity to promote professionalism and productivity, and improve reportorial and management skills of individual journalists.

Thus, as the general and presidential elections of 2011 drew near, the Union leadership focused on election reporting training aimed at making the media a positive agent for peaceful, free and fair elections. This event was part of the PUL's ten-day long activity to mark its 46th anniversary celebrations held September 28 to October 7 under the theme: "Media Integrity for Peaceful Elections."

The anniversary activities were executed in three parts, commencing with the training of 60 middle-level journalists on "elections reporting" at the YMCA auditorium on Broad Street in Monrovia. Senior journalists, editors and media heads formed part of the second category of the training program.

Renowned American journalist, Professor Mitchell Land, Interim Dean at the Mayborn School of Journalism, University of North Texas in the United States was invited to the country as guest lecturer for the anniversary activities. His coming was made possible through a partnership between the Press Union of Liberia and the Public Diplomacy Section at the United States Embassy near Monrovia.

1.2 "Strengthened Media for Transparent Elections" Project 2011

As a further manifestation of its commitment to promoting democracy and free expression, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) provided funding to the Press Union of Liberia in August 2011 to train moderators conduct a series of nation-wide legislative debates during the critical presidential and legislative elections of 2011. The debates were designed to increase citizens' participation in the electoral process by taking the candidates to the people in a town hall format. The project, "Strengthened Media for Transparent Elections" was an offshoot of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded "Civil Society and Media Leadership Program," for Liberia.

The project recognized the media as a critical link between candidates and the public in an election contest in particular and the democratic process in general. Essentially, the candidates needed the media to sell their platforms, while the public relied on the media to know who the candidates were and what they were capable of doing if they [electorates] should make informed decisions at the polls.

To meet the desired goal and objectives of the project, we enlisted the Association of Liberia Community Radios (ALICOR) since all counties and several districts of the country have their own community radio stations. With this partnership, the project successfully organized and executed 66 town hall legislative debates across the country. During the debates, senatorial and representative candidates were assembled to face each other and interact with the voters on the issues that affected their communities. Emphasis was placed on confronting the issue as opposed to the personality, considering the tension that marred the elections.

To kick start the project, the country was divided into five regions – Central, Western, Southeast ‘A’, Southeast ‘B’ and Montserrado County. Montserrado stood alone because of its size and the number of electoral districts (17 districts). Twenty journalists and community radio producers were earmarked and invited to be trained as moderators. The Union was keen on the professional ability of journalists to handle the debate, but was also concerned about a conflict sensitive touch to ease the tension around the then potentially riotous electoral campaigns. Training sessions took place across the country with national and international media experts serving as facilitators. At least 34 journalists were trained under this project.

Vice Presidential and Presidential Debates

Drawing on our experience from the 2005 elections, the Union was invited to join a consortium of five civil society organizations to conduct debates for vice presidential and presidential candidates in the 2011 polls. Four of the many presidential candidates showed up for the debate, held at the Monrovia City Hall.

1.3 Informing Peri-Urban and Rural Citizens about the Role of the National Legislature

The 11 October 2011 elections were critical. The Country conducted its first multi-party democratic elections with the incumbent President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf contesting to succeed herself. It was the country’s second post-war elections amidst high illiteracy and poverty, occasioned by corruption.

To contribute to an informed citizens’ participation, the Union and the Liberia Media Initiative (LMI) working together with support from Trust Africa, undertook a project to educate Liberians about the role of the legislature and the citizen’s corresponding rights to petition and demand performance report from their representatives in the Legislature.

It was a project designed to counter the patronage politics in the country, whereby the electorates look up to contestants for tokens and pecuniary gains on one hand, while politicians give inducement for votes and make unattainable promises far from their mandate. They make false impressions about what they would do if elected - build bridges, schools, clinics, roads and provide scholarships as though they were managing a personal enterprise.

In respond to this negative political orientation, the PUL and LMI created platforms for greater dialogue with community dwellers to get insight on their own responsibilities first to those who represent them in the governance process. The project also sought to sensitize peri-urban and rural citizens on broad information in relation to the legislative and presidential elections as well as to specifically educate the rural community dwellers on the roles and functions of their current as well as would-be lawmakers.

The collaborating institutions organized and conducted several public forum discussions on the key functions of the legislature, with the view to getting the people appreciate constitutional mandate of those who serve in the legislature. The forum were recorded, produced and distributed to community radio Stations across the country for airing.

The project appears to have scored a huge success as 53 of the 64 lawmakers of the 52nd Legislature got defeated at the polls.

1.2 Post 2011 Elections Reflection Forum

1.3.1 Retreat

The 2011 elections proved particularly frenzied not only for politicians but also for journalists in the country. There were loud public outcries that the reportages of the media, or most of them, were partisan, and questions were raised about media independence and fairness. Other pundits observed that most media organs were used by politicians to settle scores against real and perceived opponents. These queries from the public, also shared by journalists themselves, drew the attention of the PUL leadership and its partners. To explore the lingering questions of media performances during the elections, the PUL with support from IREX organized a set of activities to allow the media take stock of itself in sober reflections of the near-riotous 2011 elections.

The first of the projects, a media retreat was intended to take a critical note, review the general performance of the media during the 2011 elections, identify mistakes and shortcomings and take cue there from, as it prepares for future political activities, including the 2014 midterm legislative elections.

Held under the theme, “The Media and the 2011 Elections: Best Practices and Lesson Learned,” the retreat brought together nearly 80 participants including (managing editors, station managers and media academics), government officials and media partners.

The retreat had a broader goal of reuniting the media, but primarily to self-examine the performances of the media—considering lessons, challenges and way forward, following what can be considered as “frenzied and thrilling 2011 elections,” of which the media undoubtedly played a very crucial role.

At the end of the retreat, members of the media realized that they performed appreciably well in spite of daunting logistical and technical challenges. However, it was established that the media, in the same evaluation, committed some ethical and professional breaches that could have caused serious political chaos in the country. More so, they agreed that the PUL needed to be stronger than what it is by having teeth to bite. This biting power, the gathering suggested, could be drawn up at another retreat.

1.3.2 Special Blyden Forum

The Edward Wilmot Blyden Forum remained a critical platform for the discussion of contemporary national issues ranging from governance, free expression to rights and human development. Politicians, academics, civil society actors and religious leaders among others craved to appear on the monthly forum. In addition to the Monrovia discussions, the Union took the forum out of the capital to the countryside with special editions to generate opinions on lessons learned in the elections

Counties that hosted the special editions were Bong, Nimba, Margibi, Bomi and Grand Bassa—all sponsored by USAID/IREX and held under the theme, “Working to Make Our Democratic Governance Better.”

The dialogues afforded key electoral actors, including civil society, political parties, market women and county officials among others the opportunity to give their perspectives of the 2011 elections, lessons learnt and to proffer practical ways forward in addressing any problems they encountered or observed. Some locals for the first time exchanged views with local officials and the media and brought to the fore their misgivings as well as suggestions about governance and democracy. At least 593 persons attended the upcountry editions of the Edward Blyden Forum.

1.4 Media Safety & Defense Training

With all the pretenses set aside, the independent media is actually in a continued adversarial relationship with Government and other segments of the public that support the status quo. The media's curiosity, exposure of the corrupt and its critical editorials on gray areas of political and economic governances have made it a subject of contempt, ironfisted control, censorship and sometimes imprisonment.

It is only by a continued sober realization of this far-from-rosy relationship that helps media practitioners to keep on the safe side, to avoid the altercations they find themselves on the daily basis. Though playing safe, no matter how, is not sufficient guarantee to avoiding the aggression of the adversaries; it largely precludes smokescreens and alibis that can be quickly seized upon to make a quick kill.

It therefore became an important strategy of the PUL under our leadership to increase safety and defense skills of journalists as they plough the somewhat unpredictable media environment. Fortunately, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) shared the PUL's conviction in this endeavor and provided a helping hand.

And on November 20-22, 2012, the Union successfully conducted a three-day media defense and safety training, with 40 editors from both Print and Electronic media as beneficiaries. Through a training session, the workshop featured interesting debates on ethical journalism and provided extensive insights and knowledge on the critical issue of libel and defamation with the aim of helping practitioners guard against law suits, while at the same time promoting and upholding ethical standards, media freedom and free expression.

A horde of senior media practitioners and legal luminaries made insightful presentations which afforded participants the opportunity to learn new ideas applicable to their daily works and concluded with the setting up of an Editors' Guild, which will meet monthly to discuss and critique their own performances, as a way of strengthening the Union's self regulatory regime. This training was part of a one-year media defense project that also provides legal support through a team of willing lawyers. Thanks to counselors Syrenius Cephus, Tiawan Gongloe, Beyan Howard, Kwame Clement, Negbalee Warner, Kofi Woods among other who have provided any kind of support to the protection of journalists. A team of young attorneys, including Alphonsus Zeon and Lamii Kpargo also bring exciting new energy to our quest to defend the media.

1.5 Reporting MDG5 Workshop for Journalists

The international community through the United Nations set eight important, overarching deliverables—otherwise known as the Millennium Development Goals—which it says its member countries hoped to achieve at the fold of 2015. The deliverables particularly target developing countries, Liberia no exception, where it is expected that various poverty conditions would be slashed by half by 2015. How much progress is made since those were set and as the deadline draws near is left with the media to investigate and report. One particular interest to both the high powers of the world as well as developing countries is Goal 5 of the MDGs—maternal mortality—not only because it is germane to human existence but also because it is poorly reported or underreported.

It was against this backdrop that the PUL and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Liberia office, conducted a two-day workshop for urban and rural reporters on how to report on the health sector, particularly Millennium Development Goal 5 (MDG 5) with specific concentration on maternal mortality.

The organizers of the December 3-4, 2012 media forum realized that since MDG 5 has been underreported in the media apparently because of low appetite or lack of knowledge on the subject matter, it was imperative and demand driven to convene a gathering where reporters could benefit from information and/or knowledge sharing on maternal mortality.

The workshop brought together 20 active reporters from across the broad spectrum of the journalism profession interested in specialized reporting – the health tier.

During the two-day period of the workshop, several thematic issues including maternal health; sexual and reproductive health; family planning and development; roadmap for accelerating the reduction of maternal mortality in Liberia; reporting maternal health from the health angle and reporting maternal and sexual reproductive health – language, style and ethical considerations from the media perspective were discussed. The participants also went on a field tour to the densely populated slum community of West Point in Monrovia.

1.6 Strengthening the Media for Effective Reporting of HIV/AIDS in Liberia

In an effort to further attract the Liberian media reportages to critical but poorly reported sectors, the Union on December 27-28, 2012, during the period, organized training to strengthen the media's reportage of HIV/AIDS in the country. Since its discovery in the mid-1980s in the country, the HIV pandemic has reportedly increased its infection

Sponsored by the National AIDS Commission (NAC), the training was aimed at sharing knowledge and skills on the HIV and AIDS situating the media as essential stakeholder in combating the pandemic, to improve journalists understanding of HIV related issues; to provide coverage of HIV issues; to provide education to the public on HIV and to reduce the incidence of HIV infections and stigma and discrimination..

At least 20 active reporters from Montserrado, Margibi, Bomi and Grand Cape Mount Counties participated in the training, which also sought to develop a pool of journalists to report ethically on the pandemic.

1.7 Investigative Journalism Seminar

In further demonstration of commitment to training Liberian journalists and improve the quality of the news, the PUL sourced funding from the Public Diplomacy Section of the US Embassy in Monrovia to organize a weeklong investigative journalism seminar. This very enlightening training session took place 18 – 22 June 2012 at the Monrovia YMCA.

The exercise targeted 40 senior reporters and editors drawn from both the private and public sector of the media landscape, and grew out of the critical need to develop and strengthen the skills of journalists in investigative reporting, but more so to promote good governance, human rights, socio-political justice and the fight against corruption.

Distinguished American academic, award winning journalist and current head of the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowships in America, Ms. Lucinda Fleeson facilitated the sessions.

1.8 Annual Awards Ceremony

There can be no denying that the standard of journalism in Liberia leaves much to be desired. One long-term objective of the PUL has been to build the capacity of journalists. The training package is designed to enhance the work and performance of journalists to engender competition. With such intervention, there is a growing taste and awareness for professional development, greater productivity and excellence in the field, notwithstanding.

A critical appraisal of the work of journalists and media outlets followed with the “Annual Awards Night,” on World Press Freedom Day, at which time those who distinguished themselves in line with their reportorial duties and media management skills were recognized.

Towards making the ceremony an incentive-based one, the Union sought support and assistance from a number of institutions. To the effect, 29 reporters were given personal laptops, 8 media outlets, including community radio stations won desktop computers and CD/cassette players, while a few others received cash prizes and mini recorders and camera.

We acknowledge UNESCO, the key sponsor, as well as Lone Star Cell/MTN, UNDP, Consolidated Group Incorporated, Buchanan Renewables, Journalists for Human Rights, and New Narratives.

2.0 Administration

2.1 Congress

Following the 2009 revision of the Union’s Constitution, PUL convened in its First National Congress on 12 & 13 November 2010 at the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary in Paynesville. The Congress was organized and executed by an eight-member committee, chaired by K. Abdullai Kamara. Other members of the committee were Sheriff Z. Adams, Rose Kaiwuh, Nah Davies, John T. Monibah, Darlington Poka, D. Kaihennah Sengbeh and Ahmed Jallanzo. Within the working of the committee, Eddie Harmon and Melody Mezay volunteered their services alongside four young people as support staff. Rev. Fr. Anthony Borwah conducted the elections together with Mrs. Torwon Sulonteh Browne, Ms. Zoe Horace, Joseph Cheseman and Martin Kerkulah.

Former American Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield delivered the keynote speech, while representatives of civil society, officials of government and members of the diplomatic corps were in attendance. The registration listing of the Union showed a membership of 276, two hundred of those members were accredited for congress.

“Positioning the Media to strengthen Democracy in Liberia” was the theme of the first congress as the country was gearing up for the 2011 national elections.

2.2 PUL Launches Website

In response to persistent questions about hand-on information about the country’s media and the PUL, as well as news for and about the national local media community, the PUL finally provided some answers in the launch of an official website in August 2013. The website, www.pul.org.lr currently serves as an Online Media Resource Clearing House, and is designed to provide support and additional source of news and information for media outlets, journalists, and researchers/students. You can also now find us facebook and twitter.

During the official launching ceremonies, three speakers made presentations on the topic, “Ten Years after the War: the responsibility of the media in sustaining the peace.” Associate Professor Weade Kobbah-Wrueh, Chairperson, University of Liberia Department of Mass Communication; Mr. Aaron Kollie, Chief Executive Officer of Infinity Corporation; and Mr. Philip Wesseh, Managing Editor, Inquirer newspaper were the principal discussants.

Former PUL President, Professor Lamini Waritay, officially launched the website.

Sponsored by IREX, the site is aimed at bringing together professional development materials, including national documents, speeches, papers, media laws and regulation to enrich the resource base that will enable journalists to tell their stories accurately. It is also meant to inform journalists and public alike, about policy decisions that impact the development and practice of journalism. It also serves as a community discussion point for journalists and rural dwellers, with the focus to highlighting issues from remote parts of the country on various media outlets, thereby giving space and voice to the under reported issues from around Liberia.

To encourage content diversity in the media, the website focuses reporting on health, education, agriculture and human rights stories

2.3 Conference Hall

The history of the Press Union of Liberia cannot be told without mentioning the name Stanton Peabody. It was his imprisonment in 1964 by government that gave rise to the formation of the PUL. We feel indebted to the courage of this man. As a testimony of our appreciation for his contributions to the evolution of journalism in Liberia and the Press Union in particular, the Union named and dedicated the conference hall at the headquarters in his honor in 2010, while he was still alive. The hall is named and styled “Stanton Peabody Conference Hall.” Further to such recognition of our past, the Union unveiled the portraits of former presidents of the Union in the Hall. For us, this is another way of preserving the memory of our institution.

2.4 Outreach

In 2009, we broke new grounds in the operation of the Union as we took the Union’s anniversary celebration for the first time in 45 years out of Monrovia to Gbarnga, Bong County. It was an initial first step in increasing the visibility of the Union across the country and to connect with our colleagues in other parts of the country, thereby giving the Union a true national character. And because of the excitement that greeted the Gbarnga outreach, we could not resist taking the celebration to other counties. Hence the Gbarnga event was followed by Buchanan, Grand Bassa in 2010; Ganta, Nimba County in 2011; Robertsport, Grand Cape Mount County in 2012 and Kakata, Margibi County in 2013.

2.5 Networking

Towards enhancing the visibility and influence of the Union in and out of Liberia, time was allotted to building and maintaining partnership and synergies with a number of local, regional and international organizations.

Our engagement with the sub-regional body, the West Africa Journalists Association (WAJA), derived some honor as the President of the Union Peter Quaqua was elected in 2010 as Treasurer of WAJA.

Membership with the Federation of Africa Journalists (FAJ) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) remain in place, although our accumulated dues over the years prior to our leadership had challenged the position of

the Union with the IFJ. We managed to drastically reduce the arrears, while at the same time trying to prevent new dues from swelling.

For the record, we pay yearly dues to the organizations as follows: FAJ, US\$75.00; WAJA, US\$100; while the IFJ charges one Euro per member yearly. This means the membership strength of the Union, declared with the IFJ will determine our obligation. Though we managed to keep our membership with the IFJ, we still owe outstanding dues. We also maintained good relationship with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CJP), Reporters without Borders, and The World Association of Newspapers.

Locally, we hold membership in the Publish What You Pay Coalition (PWYP). This is a coalition of 19 civil society organizations pushing for transparency in the extractive sector. The Union chaired the group for two separate terms. PUL also holds membership in the Freedom of Information Coalition (LFIC), a network of 9 organizations working to promote citizen's access to information through policy advocacy for the Liberia Freedom of Information Act of 2010.

The Union is a respected member of the National Civil Society Council, a conglomerate of over 90 CSOs in the country, including network organizations. In fact PUL President, Peter Quaqua presided over the Council's elections that brought Mrs. Frances Greaves to power.

We were a founding member of the National Integrity Forum (NIF), established in 2010 to help in the fight against corruption. It brings together integrity-based institutions in government, civil society and private sector. The Union was however constrained to withdraw its membership in August 2013 due to the double standard demonstrated by frontline government institutions in the collaboration that appeared to undermine the corruption fight.

The Union also collaborates with several civil society organizations on security sector reform issues – advocating for reform and civilian oversight of the security sector.

2.5.1 Mini Mano River Union Conference

On May 2, 2012 journalists and media executives from Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone met in Monrovia to observe World Press Freedom Day (WPDFD) under the theme, "New Voices: Media Freedom Helping to Transform Societies." The conference provided an open forum on the state of media freedom in the Mano River Union (MRU) states, specifically in relation to the advent of the new media in the post-conflict period.

Liberia's Information Minister, Lewis Brown and Edward Kwame Yankson, Acting Deputy Secretary, the Ministry of Information and Communication of Sierra Leone were the two high level government officials in attendance; while Ambassador Attilio Pacifici, Head of the European Union Delegation; and Tirso Dos Santos, Acting Director and UNESCO Representative based in Accra were among dignitaries. Fifteen journalists came from Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast.

The conference underlined, among other things, that the role of media in fragile post-conflict societies is ever more challenging due an increasing demand on responsibility of both media and state actors in fostering an environment of peace and stability.

Participants highlighted quality education and a regulated system for financial compensation as two possible strategies for creating responsible journalism and for supporting the media to become an essential instrument of democratization and transformation.

Overall, the conference provided new opportunities for media practitioners from the three MRU countries, to share note on issues of common interest. The suggestion by a member of the Côte d'Ivoire delegation to initiate a regional framework on professional standards was one of the outcomes from the conference, while the President of the PUL called for the creation of a network of MRU journalists. The conference was sponsored by UNESCO, USAID, IREX, UNMIL and the International Center for Journalists.

2.6 Donations

During the period, the Union was blessed with gifts from a number of institutions that enhanced its capacity.

On December 9, 2011, the Carter Center Election Observation Mission donated the following items while folding up: one office desk, one scanner, two black chairs, one desktop computer, one wall clock, one in-trays, one white board, CPU+LCD monitor UPS, and stationery.

The American Embassy donated a set of office chairs, file cabinet, and desk. Trust Africa gave us one executive office chair. The Liberia Media Center (LMC) donated one second-hand 4-Runner jeep for repair and use.

As a result of project request to refurbish the Union's Resource Center, the UNDP donated ten desktop computers, one 13kva generator, 50 plastic chairs, one projector along with screen, one public address system, and one year internet subscription with six months' supply of fuel for the running of the generator.

Cellcom also provided the Union one-year free internet subscription and 250 free VPN service for journalists, while collaborating with the Union in the celebration World Press Freedom Day – 2012.

While celebrating in Buchanan 2010, the County Authority, under former Superintendent Julia Duncan Cassell, donated an acre of land to the Union. The land is strategically situated in the "Own your Own Housing Estate" community.

3.0 Welfare

3.1 Help Desk

One of the foundational objectives of the Union is the welfare of member journalists. Over the years, the Union has maintained a welfare or solidarity account to respond to some of the emergencies that befall journalists. Membership dues minimally account for this activity, but dues payment has been virtually nonexistent. Notwithstanding, we provided small support to the following journalists who were in need: Samuel Doe, James Gant, George Watkins, the late Veronica Kpan's Children, Solomon Ware, George Benson, Borbor McGill, Varney Kamara and Roland Worwee. We are particularly thankful to God for the save return of Varney Kamara, a reporter with the Community Radio in Grand Cape Mount who had to be flown to Ghana for advanced treatment, having suffered liver complications.

3.2 Eulogy/Memorial

During the last three years, very many of our colleagues including the founding torchbearers of the Union, Stanton Peabody went to be with the Lord. We also sadly recorded the death of Joshua Kpenneh, our immediate past Financial Secretary. Other deceased included Michael Kummeh, Patrick Workpoh, Patrick Passawe, Dr. Jonathan Reffell, Jeff Mutada, Joe Mulbah, Veronica Kpan, Tom Kamara, Edith Kwabo, G. Kparcon Nardoh, Emmanuel Mulbah, Obediah Karnah, Tarty Teh, MacCabo Togba, Tarnue Flomo and Othello Yarsiah. Forgive me if any name was left out.

As mark of respect for these comrades and others who predeceased them, on March 26, 2013, the Union unveiled a memorial banner to the honor of fallen journalists.

By that ceremony, the Union fulfilled one of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At the end of the TRC hearings, which included a section on the Liberian media, the Commission recommended that the Press Union of Liberia holds appropriate memorial service in honor of all journalists who fell during the Liberian crisis. Specific mention was made of the two Nigerian journalists who were killed in our conflict - Christopher Imodibie of the Guardian Newspaper and Tayo Awotusin of the Champion Newspaper.

While we were at the unveiling ceremony, a couple of names were brought to our attention. This means the Union must find creative ways of updating the list periodically.

3.3 Collective Bargaining

In April 2009, we initiated discussions with journalists and media managers on the critical need to put the working conditions of journalists on the agenda. The two days conference brought together nearly 60 media practitioners, with support from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). In fact the IFJ sent an expert to Liberia to introduce the subject and provide insight. After creating some awareness and consultations, in 2011, the Union released the first draft of a Collective Bargaining Agreement. A second draft was released, again after discussions in 2012, this time the document was subjected to debate or more appropriately, dialogue at the 47th Anniversary celebration of the Union in Robertsport, Grand Cape Mount County. The Robertsport discussions, facilitated again by the IFJ, did not yield a final agreement as anticipated due to the absence of most managers. However, significant progress was made in cleaning up the document and essentially agreeing on some the key provisions. For instance, a suggestion from one of the few managers present at the gathering was that the minimum pay for a reporter should be US\$150.00. To be honest, this was far beyond our expectations- it beat us. But the CBA is not just about salary. There are other minimum standard of employment/recruitment; the issue of social benefits and ethics are captured.

4.0 Statutory Vs Self-Regulation

4.1 Paradox of Press Freedom and Free Speech in Liberia: The Case of alarming Libel Suits

It is not surprising that all governments seek to control the media covertly or overtly. The extent of such control may vary from one regime to another regardless of the approach.

During the reporting period, there was an upsurge in the number of law suits against the media by public officials including the President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. These suits essentially sought to 'intimidate and silence' the critical voices and force the media into self-censorship.

This is a potential threat that weakens the independence of the media and undermines the free and pluralistic media development in the country. Below is a summary of the cases concluded and those pending.

4.1.2 President Sirleaf Vs. New Broom

On September 7, 2009, The Sherman & Sherman Law firm filed an Action of Damages against the New Broom Newspaper and its Publisher, Roland Worwee, on behalf of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

The President Sirleaf accused the paper of the “reckless disregard for the truth and with the intention of maligning and defaming and impugning her character both in Liberia and in the international community, and with the intention of incapacitating her in the performance of her constitutional duties.” The Paper had published in its September 3, 2009 edition that the President had been corrupted by the receipt of US\$2 million from the Cavalla Rubber Corporation to award the plantation to a western investor:

Under the headline, “For US\$2M Bribe: Lawmaker on Ellen’s Back,” the paper reported that “President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has reportedly fallen into trouble with a lawmaker of Maryland County.”

The Paper failed to respond to the charges and also did not appear in court to defend itself, claiming among other things that “most lawyers contacted to defend us have all refused on ground that they cannot be a defense lawyer for us in the case that have to do with the presidency, meaning that we have been unable to find a lawyer for our defense.”

After hearing testimonies in 2010, the court rewarded US\$5 million in damages to President Sirleaf and ordered the Paper to pay or remain closed. The New Broom has since disappeared from the newsstand and the Union has since dismissed the suit as an abuse of power and a mockery to the ‘rule of law.’ “If the President, according to Article 61 of the Liberians Constitution “shall be immune from any suit...” while sitting as President, than it goes without saying that the president cannot go to court as a complainant”

4.1.3 Consolidated Group vs. New Democrat

In 2010, Consolidated Group, a cable television provider (DStv) was rewarded US\$900,000 by the Jury against the New Democrat Newspaper. Consolidated initially requested US\$1.3M in damages. The Newspaper reported that road equipment procured by the company on behalf of government were scraps, as reported from a government audit report conducted by the General Auditing Commission (GAC). The New Democrat appealed to the Supreme Court, but the matter was later settled out of court.

4.1.4 Dr. Chris Toe Vs Front Page Africa (Rodney Sieh)

On May 10 2010, Dr. Chris Toe, former Agriculture Minister filed libel action against Front Page Africa, its Publisher, Rodney Sieh and reporter Samwar Fallah, alleging that the defendants, “with malicious intent injure his image and damage his reputation...”citing several publications. He requested the court to grant him US\$2M in addition to expenses incurred during the case.

The Paper argued that it based its reports on a government audit report into the activities of Dr. Toe, a letter written by Dr. Toe’s Deputy, Peter Korvah to the President complaining his boss of wrongdoing and a letter written by the President Sirleaf herself, instructing the GAC to investigate the former official, who is said to have been made to resign.

The trial jury handed down a guilty verdict and rewarded Mr. Toe US\$1.5 in damages. The paper’s lawyers announced an appeal to the Supreme Court, but the appeal was not perfected. Mr. Sieh contended that the appeal

process was expensive and more importantly that he could not have gotten justice at the Supreme Court, reflecting on past experiences with the court.

The Supreme Court sentenced Rodney Sieh for ten days for contempt in 2011. He spent one night at the Monrovia Central Prison, but was released after high the intervention thought to have been led by President Sirleaf.

Meanwhile, The Court dismissed the appeal and ordered the court below to execute its judgment. Journalist Sieh was subsequently ordered imprisoned on August 21, 2013 by the Civil Law Court and the print version of his paper shut-down because he was unable to pay US\$ 1.5 million libel damages to former Minister Toe.

He took sick in prison and spent a couple of weeks in John F. Kennedy Hospital, receiving treatment. He was granted a 30-day compassionate leave on October 7, 2013 by the Justice Ministry and subsequently held under house arrest. The Supreme Court took exception to the granting of the relief and held Justice Minister, Christina Tah and Cllr. Beyan Howard [one of Rodney's lawyers] in contempt.

4.2 Pending Trial

Front Page Africa faces another libel suit, this time from Ms. Matilda Parker, the Managing Director of the National Port Authority. She's is seeking US\$1 million in damages over a story about the findings of an investigation by the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission. The overriding issue in this complaint relates to republished comments from the paper's website, deemed "insulting." The paper had earlier issued an apology to Ms Parker, in addition to a condemnation by the Press Union against the distasteful comment.

4.2.1 Robert Sirleaf Vs Independent & Analyst – US\$11M

On March 28, 2012, Robert Sirleaf (the President's son), then chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Oil Company, sued *The Independent* and *The Analyst*, demanding US\$11 million damages. The case is said to have been dropped. The Independent had written a story under the caption: "*Sirleaf's Oil or Liberia's Oil? As Robert Sirleaf Hijack Five Oil Blocks.*" While the Analyst headline read: "Where Are the Progressives? Wonders CDC Auxiliaries Chief in Light of Robert Sirleaf's Influence, Wealth."

4.2.2 National Chronicle Newspaper—US\$5 million

The Sister of President Sirleaf, Janet Bernard, early 2013 sued the National Chronicle Newspaper, demanding US\$5 million in a libel suit. The paper ran series of stories linking her to a controversial property (real estate) case at the Robert International Airport.

The Monitor Newspaper—US\$6million

On April 30, 2013, the Director of the Presidential security guard, Othello Warrick, filed an action of damages for wrong against the Monitor Newspaper, requesting US\$6 million. The paper on April 11, 2013 published an article entitled: "Ellen's Presidential Guard Cars Banjo." The paper reported, among other things, that the Executive Protection Service (EPS) which Warrick heads, was selling government vehicles for as cheap as US\$100 each. In said report, the paper mentioned that Warrick was "transferring money medical check-up and vacation to his family in the United States of America.

Octavin Williams, Rhodoxon Fayiah and Moses Togbah -- US\$500,000

On October 6, Mr. Praise Lawal, Managing Director, Pealat Construction Company filed for Damages for Defamation of Character. Mr. Lawal had earlier charged one of the three – Octavin with Criminal Coercion. Octavin

was arrested along with another journalist, Rufus Paul and sent to jail; but both of them were released to the custody of the President of the PUL, Peter Quaqua. That charge was subsequently dropped after the intervention of Solicitor General, Betty Lamin-Blamo on grounds of insufficient evidence.

On separate occasions, two other journalists were held for criminal coercion. Matthews Barjay, a simple (special) English newscaster with UNMIL Radio and James Aquoi of the State Radio. Matthew was hurriedly arraigned before an associate magistrate at the Monrovia City Court and sent to jail, with the benefit of a lawyer. We had to guarantee his release to return him to the court the next day. His complainant never went back to follow-up his case. The harm he committed was report the sale of passport form as the Foreign Ministry.

4.3 The Media Complaints Committee

As part of efforts to hold the media practitioners accountable through a very strong self-regulatory regime, the Union launched the Media Complaints Committee (MCC) on October 2, 2011, while observing the 47th anniversary of the Union in Ganta, Nimba County. By the launch of the MCC, the erstwhile Grievance and Ethics Committee ceased to exist. Unlike the Ethics Committee that was composed mainly of journalists, the MCC is a multi-stakeholders self-regulatory mechanism designed to address the issues of ethics and professional conduct that is fast eroding the credibility of the media in Liberia. It brings together one representative from the Bar Association, one from the civil society, one from women groups, one from government and three media representatives.

The first members of the committee who have now served their two-year term are: University of Liberia Mass Communication Department Chairperson, Weade Kobbah-Wrueh, Chair; Abdullai Kamara, Secretary and the former Chairman of the previous Grievance and Ethics Committee, Ledgerhood Rennie, all media representatives.

The rest are Atty. Fatou M. Coleman, Co-Chairman, representing the Bar Association, Ms. Finda Salay, women representative from Women NGO Secretariat, Deputy Minister Elizabeth E. Hoff, representing the Government of Liberia and Maxime Kummeh, representing a Civil Society.

The Union remains very keen on the defense of journalists against arbitrary actions and/or government control.. As a corresponding responsibility, we've insisted on strengthening our self-regulation to encourage government's hands off the media, but essentially to build greater public acceptability and confidence in media ethics and accountability.

Several media institutions and journalists appeared before the committee during the period. But it is refreshing to note that among the complainants were the government and government officials, diplomats, judges, lawmakers, corporate entities and private citizens.

We might not have been able to hear all the cases due to other competing distractions, but we were able to raise the profile of the committee as a forum to check the professional conduct of journalists. Our options are limited in this regard; we must therefore seek to better the gains to engender public confidence. A proposal has been tabled at UNESCO to support the work of the committee.

While fighting against frivolous lawsuits aimed at silencing journalists, the Union cannot afford to be a passive observer in the face of gross ethical infractions. We have had a challenge of buy-in from a few institutions, which are understandably influenced by their ownership and sense of self-righteousness. But it should be said that the media that does not embrace self-regulation, opens itself up for coercive government control. Going forward, we like to

recommend a review of the current Code of Conduct and Ethics to reflect emerging ethical challenges in reporting specialized cases of women, children, and pornography.

5.0 Media Defense and Advocacy

5.1 Clampdown on Media Entities

During the latter phase of the 2011 elections, one noteworthy incident that engendered the Union into action was the government's decision to close down four radio and three television stations on November 8th 2011. This incident followed the November 7th 2011 bloody showdown between the Liberia National Police and protesters of the opposition Congress for Democratic Change, CDC.

The stations were merely reporting a standoff between the police and The Party, opposed to the holding of the run-off presidential election, alleging a litany of irregularities in the first ballot. In the running street battle that ensued to disperse CDC, one supporter of the party was shot dead.

Shortly before the stations were taken off air, Justice Minister, Christiana Tah, convened a press conference to say that 'hate and inflammatory messages' were broadcast by these media outlets to have partly caused the shootings.

Acting on orders from Criminal Court 'A', instigated by a petition filed by both the Ministries of Information and Justice, armed police officers raided the media houses (Royal Communication, Kings FM/TV, Clar TV, Power FM Radio/TV, Love FM/TV and Shaita FM) and shut them down.

Presiding Judge James Zotaa summoned the parties for a pretrial conference court on Thursday, November 10.

The respondents [media outlets] asked the court to dismiss the case for lack of jurisdiction, but the Judge denied the motion. On the other hand, the prosecution embarked on a 'fishing expedition' as it sought a writ of "Subpoena Duces Tecum" to compel managements of the media houses involved to produce self incriminating electronics evidence of audio and visual recordings. The defense objected.

Government lawyers however presented 12 different species of material to the Judge, including newspaper cuttings and press statements, photographs of damaged buildings and other electronically generated audio and visual materials-obtained during the election period. These pieces of evidence were strangely not made open in court, nor were the defense allowed to see/hear the evidence.

Referring to these pieces of evidence, the judge said, "This Court, after reviewing thoroughly the entire evidence of the petitioners, is convinced that the respondents did use their media outlets/stations in the manner and form as stated in the petition; for example, in listening to the clips and other recordings on the CD's presented by the petitioner, the court clearly heard messages calling for the general disarmament of the national security forces and the UN forces and that Liberia should be made ungovernable among other things." The Court further said, "the use of the media in that way amounts to spreading hate messages of violence. He cited 1972 panel Code of Liberia, terming the broadcast of the media institution as 'criminal and an indictable offense'"

Judge Zotaa therefore ruled that the actions of the media entities warranted closure and punishment to preserve the peace and security of the state, but however noted that "this court will not proceed to, at this time, impose the appropriate penalty against the respondents in the interest of press freedom as guaranteed under the Constitution.

He then ordered reopening of the entities with a caveat, threatening that “Should the respondents repeat the act which this Court has determined to be hate messages and call to insurrection; the Ministry of Information may revoke the permits and licenses revoked issued the respondents.

In reaction to the ruling, The President of the Press Union, Peter Quaqua rejected the verdict as a “merely an attempt to intimidate the media and scare them into submission.” Mr. Quaqua argued that the evidence tendered in court was only meant for the judge...we did not see or hear it and it is clear that the threat from the judge represents censorship which is not in the interest of press freedom...” The PUL insisted that the ruling contained ill-defined references as contravention of the law that needed better explanation; such as what constitutes ‘hate speech.’

“I did not learn anything from this case; normally we go to court to garner lessons for the future but in this case that purpose has not been served,” PUL President Peter Quaqua said.

5.1.1 Reporter Threatened for Story on FGM

The attention of the Union was drawn to the reported threats on the life of Front Page Reporter Mae Azango, by individuals believed to be connected with the Sande Society.

The Union expressed concerns about the safety of Mae who went into hiding after narrating the ordeal of a victim of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in a publication on March 8, 2012.

Mae informed the Union that she had to escape from her own house because a female tenant had threatened her life, in addition to a number of anonymous phone calls and messages threatening to attack her because of the story.

5.1.2 Nigerian Pastor’s Bodyguards Attack Journalists

It is regrettably becoming a near norm when security personnel or public official assault journalists, but it is shocking to hear of civil society actors, let alone, a religious leader as perpetrator of such abuse.

The Union was stunned on December 14, 2011, when it received news of the flogging of two Journalists in Monrovia by bodyguards of Solution Temple Church Pastor, Bishop Bethel Onhenke on the grounds of the Temple of Justice, seat of Liberia judiciary.

Front Page Africa Newspaper reporters, M. Welemongai Ciapha and Freelance Photographer Mulinda Mulbah were reportedly flogged by Bodyguards of Solution Temple Bishop Bethel Onhenke while photographing the Bishop.

The Bishop had been taken to the office of the Assistant Montserrado County, Atty. Dedeh Jomah Wilson for a conference on allegation of ‘stealing a gold chain’ from one of his spiritual clients.

5.2 Solidarity Action

Liberian journalists, under the auspices of the Press Union of Liberia celebrated the 2012 World Press Freedom Day in Buchanan, Grand Bass County, under the theme, “*Safe to Speak: Securing Freedom of Expression for All Media.*”

While observing the day, the Union invited security agencies including the Ministry of Defense, National Police, Immigration and the Executive Protection Service (EPS) to sit with a civil society and media representatives on a panel to speak on the topic, “Media-Security Relations—an Imperative for Consolidating Peace in Liberia.” The topic came from the backdrop of the strains that characterize relations between journalists and government officials, particularly security operatives assigned with those officials. Media watchdog groups have documented scores of

incidents of fracas, including the manhandling of journalists and the smashing and seizure of journalists' gadgets while covering official functions.

The event was therefore meant to bring both sides around the table, present their cases and plow new grounds for improved relations that would facilitate the unhindered exercise of the media's right and responsibility in the discharge of their duties.

Othello Warrick

The most controversial and shocking remarks came from the head of the Executive Protection Service (EPS), Othello Warrick. The EPS was formally, the Special Security Service (SSS), charged with the responsibility of providing security for the President of Liberia and other VIPs. Like other security units in the country, the EPS or its predecessors, have had strained relations with the media and the general public. Warrick, the current head of the EPS, commenced his presentation recalling the heavy-handedness of presidential guards and other security apparatuses of Government in the past with the question, "Can you remember the days of Samuel Doe and General Taylor?" stating that it was not a statement to relegate those individuals but to give "a sober reflection of the essence of freedom in those difficult days of the existence of Liberians".

But after making those comments, he then followed the "Samuel doe and General Taylor" style by issuing threats to go after journalists, arrest without warrant, limiting the level of freedom provided by the President Sirleaf, describing some journalists as terrorists and so on.

Warrick further commented: We came today to register but will not for the sake of this day. We will allow the freedom that madam Sirleaf has given to be enjoyed. But be careful in questioning the integrity of Liberians because you have your pen and we have our gun. And if you incriminate the character and integrity of Liberians like myself, we will come after you. We will definitely.

Reactions to the statements at the occasion were spontaneous and strong. Some booed while some took the stage to vent their anger, and to defy the presidential security chief in his threat to "come after" journalists.

The Union did not want to jump at any quick conclusions that President Sirleaf sent her EPS Director, to spew those threats, but for nearly a week. Our government refused to condemn this threat against the media. There were fears that the lack of response to such a condescending and threatening statement by a senior security functionary points to approval by the president and threatens freedom of expression, highlighting impunity against the media.

Hence, a mass meeting was called on May 9 to derive a collective decision to send a message to Mr. Warrick and his principal. Among other things: all independent newspapers were printed black front pages with appropriate inscriptions; Radio and TV stations suspended broadcast for 2 hours daily from 9:00 – 11:00 am and assigned reporters covering the president withdrawn.

5.3 PUL-UNICEF Launch Liberia Children's Media Day (LCMD)

In December 1991, UNICEF launched the International Children's Day of Broadcasting (ICDB) to encourage broadcasting media houses (especially radios) to create awareness on issues affecting children - people around the world "Tuned in to Kids".

But in 2012, UNICEF ended the ICDB initiative to encourage both private and public media outlets across the world to undertake similar initiatives thus promoting ownership and sustainability.

With no ICDB from 2012, the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), UNICEF, The Association of Liberia Community Radios (ALICOR) and Search for Common Grounds (SFCG) met on 25 April 2013 to develop a national event equivalent to the ICDB. This culminated in the launch, on May 25, 2013 of the Liberia Children Media Day (LCMD) and will be celebrated every year in Liberia to coincide with the global observance of World Press Freedom Day. The inaugural event was held on the **THEME:** “WE ARE THE TODAY AND THE TOMORROW.”

The name LCMD was coined to reflect all aspect of the media as opposed to only radio broadcast. Television and Print media houses under the Liberian brand are encouraged henceforth to create a wider platform for children to express their views/opinions, but more importantly to encourage the early development kids who have writing skills.