

**FROM THE EXCHEQUER TO THE EDITORIAL SUITE:
DILATING THE INTRA-PROFESSIONAL MUTATIONS
OF ONYEMA UGOCHUKWU**

***Tunde OLUSUNLE, Ph.D.**

Abstract

This study seeks to dilate the professional enterprise of Onyema Ugochukwu, one of the most respected practitioners and influencers of contemporary media practice and specialised journalism in Nigeria. It investigates his professional background as an economist and banker, through his detour into the media as progenitor of a new genre of technicalized reportage, and a seasoned manager in one of Nigeria's most important newspapers in its time, the Daily Times of Nigeria Plc. It also scrutinises his later undertakings in political communication and public information management in his polyvalent media career over a period of five decades. Deploying the historic-analytic method, this article probes the career course of Ugochukwu as a reporter, writer, editor, editorial director, political publicist and presidential communicator. This is to appropriately define his contributions to these aspects of the gamut of media practice, and to national growth. It successfully establishes that Ugochukwu has contributed immensely to the elevation and standardization of media practice and its repositioning as a profession which commands scholarship and intellectualism in the furtherance of national development.

Keywords: Political publicist, National growth, Presidential communicator, Onyema Ugochukwu, Media professional.

Introduction

For those who encountered Onyema Ugochukwu only in the years immediately after the return of democratic governance in Nigeria a little over two decades ago, it will be understandable if he is profiled as an administrator, politician and statesman. Such followers of his career will predicate their submissions on the fact that he was the pioneer Chairman of the Niger Delta Development Commission

*Tunde OLUSUNLE, Ph.D. is of the People and Politics Magazine, Abuja, Nigeria
Email: babatstone@yahoo.co.uk

(NDDC). The interventionist agency was established by the administration of erstwhile President Olusegun Obasanjo, to help address the neglect of the oil producing states and communities, notably in the south-south geopolitical zone, and the neighbouring south east and south west. The assignment entailed shrewd management of resources remitted by the federal government and oil producing companies for the development of the oil-bearing areas. It enhanced national visibility for Ugochukwu. In December 2000, Obasanjo appointed him to lead the NDDC and to ensure that the new Commission succeeded where previous efforts had failed.

Ugochukwu may also be described as a politician by many, because he contested the governorship of his home state, Abia, during the 2007 general elections. He won the primaries of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), the ruling political party at the time. The general election, where he contested against Theodore Ahamaefule Orji of the Progressive Peoples Alliance (PPA), was reportedly marred by several irregularities and alleged compromises by officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Ugochukwu was declared runner-up in the election and the matter subsequently went through a tortuous judicial process to determine the actual winner of the election. While Ugochukwu was adjudged winner of the polls by the Elections Petitions Tribunal, the case was taken to the Court of Appeal for further adjudication. Ugochukwu and his party were reportedly schemed out, with Orji and the PPA, adjudged winners. The PDP and Ugochukwu filed for a cross appeal of the matter at the Port Harcourt division of the Court of Appeal. He was once more outwitted ostensibly, by a web of conspiracies and intrigues. This level of involvement in partisan politics will reinforce the perception of Ugochukwu as a politician.

As an elder statesman, Ugochukwu was a delegate to the 2014 National Conference, instituted by the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, to discuss the national question and issues and problems bedeviling the country. These endeavours and his many roles at the level of his community and various sociocultural groupings in his south east geopolitical zone, further subsume his primary preoccupation as a media practitioner and publicist. His longstanding loyalty, commitment and consistency as a long serving member of the PDP, irrespective of his experiences in the past, was rewarded with his induction into the Board of Trustees (BOT) of the party a few years back. The body is the topmost advisory organ of the party, and is made up of accomplished and respectable leaders and elders, whose guidance and interventions on matters affecting the health and well-being of the party, are taken seriously. This again is one aspect of his more recent multivalent engagements, which could obfuscate his

primordial professional foundations and exertions. As he strides towards the league of octogenarians and living legends of the profession, it becomes critical to situate his most eventful career in the media, within the context of his aggregate contributions to the profession and indeed to national development.

Early Career

Ugochukwu attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) where he studied Economics, earning a Second Class Honours Upper Division degree in 1972. He was admitted to the university in 1966 and was already a student in the institution in 1967, when the Nigerian Civil War, broke out. This development impacted his education as Ugochukwu (2014, p.53), explains: I went to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka to read Economics. The war came and disrupted our education for about three years. During the war, we had to go into the Biafran Army and fight. When my best friend, Henry got killed, I had to join... I had to compete to join the School of Infantry. It was a tough competition. Six weeks after training you were commissioned an officer. The next thing was to face the warfront. If you were alive in three months, they would confirm you a Second Lieutenant. I got a double promotion to become a full Lieutenant, although I got injured not too long after. The war ended and we went back to school in 1970 and I graduated in 1972.

Ugochukwu indeed went on to become a Captain in the Biafran Army, before the end of the war. Upon graduation, he was employed by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) as a research analyst. The Research Department was one of the several subdivisions in the organogram of the CBN, under the supervision of the deputy governor in charge of Economic Policy. By 1975, however, Ugochukwu, a quester for new challenges gave up his job in the CBN, for a new career in the media. Ugochukwu notes further: The CBN paid the highest salary then... But I wanted to be a journalist because it was exciting. I took a salary cut to become a journalist. My starting salary in the CBN was £1,400. The federal civil service was starting people at £800. When we converted to naira in 1972, it simply multiplied by two. My salary became £2,880 per year. In 1975, my salary was N5,600. *Daily Times* offered me N4,500 and I accepted it. I went over to work for *Business Times* which was just starting then.

Ismail Babatunde Jose was Managing Director of the *Daily Times* conglomerate when Ugochukwu joined the organisation. Jose, adjudged perhaps the most successful chief executive of the *Daily Times* group, had initiated general interest publications like *Spear* magazine, *Headlines* newspaper, and *Times International* magazine.

But he desired a specialised newspaper to amplify developments in the nation's economic and financial sector, following the indigenization exercise of 1974. That policy, encouraged Nigerians to venture into entrepreneurship and participation in the nation's stock market. *Daily Times* newspaper had a business section. But Jose believed the space and attention devoted to business and economy was inadequate to capture the socioeconomic dynamics of the time. This vision berthed the *Business Times* newspaper. Jose and his colleagues in the *Daily Times* had to search for journalists with bias for business and economy, to pioneer the publication. According to Jose (1986, p.132):

(Business Times) was the only publication started during my time for which we had to look outside *Daily Times* for an Editor. Because of the economics background required for that post, I asked my friends at the Central Bank to identify some of their bright young men who could be successfully trained in journalism within the shortest possible period to become Editor of the newspaper. That was how we recruited Effiong Essien a former staff of CBN's Research Department as Editor of *Business Times*. He was succeeded by another CBN man, Onyema Ugochukwu now Editor of *West Africa* weekly magazine.

Business Times

Ugochukwu obtained a postgraduate certificate in sub-editing from the Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ), to prepare himself for the challenges of his new vocation. Later in his career, he served as Visiting Instructor in financial reporting in the same institution. He began his professional journey in *Business Times* as an economic analyst. His core responsibility was to explain the technical terminologies and nuances of business and economy, to a population just getting to grips with concepts like stocks, shares and the market situation. He was on this brief for just eight months before his appointment as acting editor of *Business Times*, and subsequently, substantive editor of the financial newspaper. Koyi (2011, p.444), recalls that Ugochukwu belonged to the crop of earliest university graduates who were enlisted into journalism by Jose, a development which changed the face of the profession for good: ... Jose has been most influential in shaping the lives of many of today's journalism greats in Nigeria... Some of these people, notably Ogunsanwo, Ugochukwu, Sonaike and Aboaba were

fresh university graduates that he (Jose) recruited into his pilot journalism programme, which in fact, marked a turning point in the practice of the pen profession.

Business Times became the reference point and most authoritative outlet for economic discourse in Nigeria. This reality challenged emerging print media organisations to also establish business tabloids so as to remain competitive in the newspaper market. The emergence of *Business Concord* published by Concord Press of Nigeria; *Business Guardian* from Guardian Newspapers Ltd, among others, were stimulated by the precedence of *Business Times*. Side by side with this, Ugochukwu mentored successor financial journalists, notably Ndu Ughamadu, Kunle Bello, Femi Olatunde, Kene Okafor, Wole Olatimehin and Emeka Odo, among others, who also contributed to the evolution of business journalism. They have also contributed to the growth of various institutions in the economic sector in the course of their careers. Ughamadu served as two-time spokesperson for the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, (NNPC), while Olatunde was an assistant director in the corporate affairs department of the CBN, before his unfortunate demise in 2011. Emeka Odo is serving his second term as Chairman of the Enugu State Board of Internal Revenue, ESBIR. The Board, under his administration, increased internally generated revenue (IGR) in the state by over 100% between 2016 and 2019. The IGR figures grew from ₦14 billion realised in 2016 before Odo's appointment, to ₦31 billion three years later.

As editor of *Business Times* and subsequently as one of the globally accredited business journalists in his time, Ugochukwu covered or attended, among others, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1976 and annual meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1977, 1984 and 1988. He was also at the United Nations (UN) Special Session on the African Economic Crisis in 1986. He covered the UN General Assembly in 1988 and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Special Economic Session in Lagos in 1980 and the follow-up session in Addis Ababa in 1985. Ugochukwu covered annual meetings of the African Development Bank (ADB) in 1986, 1990 and 1991. He was also at the 1983 and 1984 meetings of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and annual meetings of the Editorial Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1977, 1983, 1988 and 1990, and the annual summits of G7 countries in 1977 and 1984.

West Africa Magazine

In 1983, Ugochukwu was deployed to the London office of the *Daily Times* group, publishers of *West Africa* magazine. Just before his redeployment, *The Guardian* newspaper which was just coming on stream made him a job

offer. At the same time, he had been offered a job with OPEC, in Vienna, Austria. Determined to retain his services, however, the leadership of the *Daily Times*, offered him a position in *West Africa*. According to Ugochukwu:

I had been Editor of *Business Times* for five years. I was getting a bit restless. *The Guardian* was starting. I was part of the planning for *The Guardian*. They gave me a letter of appointment as an Associate Editor. My Managing Director heard about it and tried to talk me out of it. Not too long after, I had gone for an interview in Vienna and OPEC offered me a job. It became "if going abroad was what you wanted, why don't you go to the *West Africa* magazine in London?" (p.53)

The magazine had Kaye Whiteman as editor, while Ugochukwu functioned as his deputy. Ugochukwu assumed the substantive position of editor of the publication, in 1985. He thus became the very first African to be appointed editor of the 60-year old magazine at the time. *West Africa* magazine which was established in 1917 was conceived as a veritable fountain of information about developments and goings on in the Anglophone countries of West Africa. It was reputed to be the most diligent reporter and recorder of sociopolitical events in the West African sub-region. Its reportage documented West Africa, in the years during which coups and counter-coups defined governance and political stability in the sub-region. Working in *West Africa* enabled Ugochukwu to meet many international figures in the line of duty. Remarkably, his writings dwelt among others, on developmental and economic concerns, drawing attention to Africa's debt burden and the need for global understanding. Ugochukwu was in *West Africa* for a little over four years, and according to him, "I worked hard, I was committed".

Daily Times

Upon his return to Nigeria in 1987, Ugochukwu was appointed Editor of the *Daily Times*. Ascending to the editorship of the *Daily Times*, the leading newspaper in Nigeria at the time was for a journalist akin to being appointed a service chief in the Nigerian military. Olagunju (ed., 1996, pp. 35-42), lists Ugochukwu's predecessors in that position to include: Ernest Ikoli (1926 to 1929); Adeleye Titcombe (1929 to 1942); Ayodele Lijadu (1943 to 1946) and J.S. Ogunlesi, the first graduate (January to February 1947). There were also Joseph Oloyede (1947

to 1951); Ebus Adesioye (1951 to 1955); Gabriel Idigo (1955 to 1957) and Babatunde Jose (1957 to 1962). Other editors of *Daily Times* included Peter Enahoro (1962 to 1964); Alade Odunewu (1964 to 1968); Henry Odukamaiya (1969 to 1972) and Areoye Oyebola (1972 to 1975). Segun Osoba (August 1975 to December 1975); Tony Momoh (1976 to 1980); Martin Iroabuchi (1980 to 1984) and Farouk Umar Mohammed (1984 to 1986), all edited *Daily Times* before Ugochukwu came on board in 1987.

Ugochukwu had a notably studious approach to his job. Olusunle and Okereke (2009) report that he spent the first few hours at work every day, studying the file of newspapers and publications on his desk. He diligently observed this ritual before any other distraction. He matched the coverage of news and events by the *Daily Times*, with other publications. He also articulated topical issues for discussion and consideration at the daily "editorial conference" with line editors, a routine. Line editors within the context of the newspaper industry in Nigeria, are specialist heads of the various departments which feed the editorial content of the newspaper. They include the: news, features, political, business and economy, international affairs, sports, arts and culture, science and technology, defence, aviation, women and children, photo, graphics and special reports departments, among others. Editorial specialisation had become imperative in consonance with the dynamics of the newspaper industry. Ugochukwu attended meetings of the editorial board, the intellectual engine room of the newspaper. The board comprised mainly of scholars and academics in various fields of knowledge, and he made contributions. He was the bridge between the newsroom and the editorial board, ensuring that there were intersections between themes and topics the newsroom was probing, relative to subjects being considered for lead commentary by the editorial board.

Ugochukwu began his job as editor of *Daily Times*, when Olusegun Osoba, was Managing Director. The appointment of Yemi Ogunbiyi as Osoba's successor engendered a new dispensation of collaboration between two sticklers for hard work, innovation and a brand new work ethic. Olusunle (2019, p.83) claims that the *Daily Times* itself was not without its fair share of career journalist-intellectuals who shared Ogunbiyi's vision for a rejuvenated organisation. There were the likes of Onyema Ugochukwu, the economist-banker turned journalist who was one of the pioneers of contemporary business journalism, Farouk Umar Mohammed who had functioned variously as Editor and General Manager of the *Daily Times*...

Ogunbiyi's appointment took effect from March 1, 1989. His last job was Executive Director and Chief of Staff of *The Guardian*. He came with revolutionary ideas to re-engineer the *Daily Times* which had assumed a conservative editorial temperament, over the years. This ran counter to the editorial robustness of its major challengers. Consequently, its major

competitors enjoyed greater mass appeal on the newsstands. With the support of Ugochukwu and progressively-inclined senior executives, fundamental personnel changes in the organisation were initiated. This involved hiring bright and experienced young professionals from other media organisations, predominantly from *The Guardian*. This helped the makeover project of the *Daily Times*. Emphasis was also placed on the re-training and retooling of existing personnel, as the organisation began to embrace modernization in the emerging milieu of computerization. Olusunle (2017, p.439), has “alluded to the massive, cross-departmental overhaul of the organisation, culminating in the rapid and radical improvement of editorial content and discourse within a brief span.” The *Daily Times* rapidly regained respectability and mass appeal. The new reputation of the *Daily Times* opened doors and world leaders were receptive to being interviewed by the newspaper. Notable figures interviewed by Ugochukwu include Nigeria’s former military President, Ibrahim Babangida; former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (conducted with Yemi Ogunbiyi) and Sierra Leone’s former leader, Siaka Stephens.

Controversies surrounding the passing away or otherwise of Nigeria’s first republic President, Nnamdi Azikiwe, created quite a dilemma for the press in 1989. On November 4, 1989, a number of newspapers published a story reporting the presumed departure of the former Nigeria leader. The *Daily Times*’ lead story on that day, had the headline “Zik is Dead” and the newspaper was signed by Ugochukwu. As it turned out, however, this was a hoax which created quite some credibility challenge for the hitherto respected tabloid. Ogunbiyi (2018) recalls that: ... The old man was well and alive in his Nsukka home. Shortly after we ran the story, the late K.O. Mbadiwe stormed *Daily Times* to announce that Zik had handed over the mantle of Igbo leadership to him before he died! Minutes after that, R.B.K. Okafor came in and claimed that he was the last man that Zik had spoken to and anointed the next leader of the Igbo! Both men ended up dying before Zik himself died. Meanwhile, the Board of the *Daily Times*, headed at that time by the late Mr Laban Namme, who by the way a devout Zikist as a young man, was called for the sack of our Editor, Mr Onyema Ugochukwu, as he then was. I pleaded with the Board and only after I had offered to resign instead of having Onyema go, was the matter dropped.

Ugochukwu was naturally a sober, meticulous and discerning professional and Ogunbiyi reckoned that that gaffe was not the making of a generally circumspect, thorough and painstaking top journalist. Ugochukwu was a famous taskmaster in the *Daily Times*. He was averse to mediocrity and indolence of any kind. Olusunle and Okereke (2009) recall Olusunle’s encounter with him on his return from an assignment in Opobo, Rivers State, on the centenary of King Jaja in 1991:

On his return from the Island, Olusunle filed his report which was splashed on the *Sunday*

Times magazine. The morning after, Ugochukwu accosted Olusunle along the corridor and incredulously barked at him: My friend, are you back? Thinking Ugochukwu had not seen the Sunday magazine feature for which he had been lavishly commended by readers, Olusunle replied: Yes Sir, I'm back. You should have seen the *Sunday Times* magazine. Ugochukwu's face was deadpanned. Big deal, Ugochukwu replied. How did you get to Opobo? ... I want to read your experience, a travelogue with photographs... Is there nightlife in Port Harcourt? Do me a social diary. When this organisation sends a writer of your calibre on an assignment that is the minimum we expect in return. Typical of Ugochukwu, he managed to squeeze out not one, but three stories from one single assignment.

Ugochukwu and Ogunbiyi, shared the same views and perceptions about some editorial staff. These journalists, notably: Tunde Ipinmisho, Dupe Ajayi, Femi Ajayi, Segun Ayobolu, Emeka Nwosu, Chijioke Amu-Nnadi, Afam Akeh, Dapo Adeniyi, Yomi Ola, Tunde Kaitell, Victor Ekpuk, Gbenga Ayeni, Felix Omorogbe, Ngozi Ikeano, Kayode Tejumola, Tunde Rahman, Hakeem Bello, this writer and a select others, were labelled "Ugochukwu/Ogunbiyi boys" by long serving *Daily Times* staffers. They were usually top on the list of journalists to be deployed on critical assignments which was misconstrued as privilege, especially by long serving staffers. On the contrary, these officers were trusted to deliver quality at the shortest time possible, irrespective of inconveniences. The situation actually meant they were prone to being overworked. For Ugochukwu and Ogunbiyi, the reward for hard work, was more work. Amu-Nnadi, one of Ugochukwu's mentees, who has grown into an award-winning third generation Nigerian poet, pays tribute to Ugochukwu in his debut collection of poems, *The Fire Within* (2002): "Onyema Ugochukwu, mentor, boss, father and friend, you gave me the paper to write with a long time ago. Many years later when the desert threatened you found me once more. Thank you for the water you hold out to a pilgrim." (p.i). Such was the manner of mentorship Ugochukwu impacted on his professional wards.

Activist

Ugochukwu demonstrated some activism when he rallied colleagues in the media to resuscitate and reposition the moribund Nigerian Guild of Editors

(NGE). Founded in 1961, the NGE was conceived to provide a rallying forum for editorial leaders in the nation's journalism profession and to create a professional path for the growth of the industry. It was to serve as an exclusive melting pot of top-level media practitioners to advance the interests of the profession and deepen their relationships with their various audiences. For almost a decade, beginning from 1978, however, the NGE was dysfunctional. It was reawakened by Ugochukwu and a few editor colleagues, who unanimously supported Ugochukwu's ascendancy as its first President, after those long years of inactivity. He occupied the office from 1988 to 1990.

One of the highlights of Ugochukwu's term in office was the intervention of the guild in securing the release of their colleague, Chris Mammah from detention by the security services under Ibrahim Babangida's rule. Mammah as acting Editor of *The Punch* had approved the publication of a cartoon in the newspaper, which the military authorities interpreted as supportive of the attempted regime change of April 22, 1990, against the Babangida government. The coup was led by Gideon Gwaza Orkar and the cartoon in question, depicted the national gloom which attended the foiling of that coup attempt. Mammah was set free after the engagement of the Guild with the top echelon of the secret service.

Administrator

For a 15-month period between 1990 and 1991, Ugochukwu served as Acting General Manager of the Times Publications Division (TPD). This was the subsidiary of the *Daily Times* organisation which managed the broad spectrum of the institution's publications. Ugochukwu's reassignment followed the nomination of the substantive General Manager, Farouk Mohammed, for a programme at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, Plateau State. Ugochukwu continued to invest his energies and expertise into the overall growth of the organisation, a period which culminated in the resurgence of *Daily Times* to its primordial leadership position in the industry. He was renowned for his frugality, where his background in economics regularly came to play, in scrutinising inflated requests for out-of-state travel allowances and applications for refund of expenditure on local shuttles by staff.

On Mohammed's return from NIPSS, Ugochukwu reverted to his duty post as editor of *Daily Times*. Following the reconstitution of the Board of the organisation in February 1992, Ugochukwu was appointed Executive Director, Manpower and Development. Not too long thereafter, he was re-designated Executive Director, Publications, which once again availed him the opportunity to impact on the content

and form of the broad spectrum of publications in the publishing giant. He was also Chairman, Board of Governors of the Times Journalism Institute (TJI), among other administrative responsibilities. Ugochukwu retired from the *Daily Times*, after 20 eventful years in the organisation, on his 50th birthday, November 9, 1994.

Presidential Campaign Publicist

After his retirement from the *Daily Times*, Ugochukwu established a media consultancy. He reported for *Dow Jones*, which publishes the world's most credible business news and financial information in a variety of media. He also handled a number of special publications, among other media briefs. He was also a Visiting Member of the Editorial Board of *The Guardian* where he continued to contribute actively to national discourse. Abati (2004, p.xiv) lists Ugochukwu along with eminent scholars and professionals like Chidi Amuta, Kayode Soremekun, Sam Oyovbaire, Hope Eghagha, Felix Adenaike, George Ehusani, Emevwo Biakolo, Godwin Sogolo and Fred Onyeoziri, who put their time, intellectual resources and aggregate experience, at the service of the vocation and country, on the platform of *The Guardian*.

Ugochukwu subsequently functioned as Director of Publicity of the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Campaign Organisation, which began to gather traction in the last quarter of 1998. Babarinsa (2013, p. 238), has suggested that Ugochukwu had a preexisting relationship with Obasanjo which was activated when the latter began consultations with stakeholders and leaders, ahead of the formal commencement of the project. Alluding to Obasanjo's first coming as military Head of State following the demise of Murtala Ramat Mohammed, February 13, 1976, Babarinsa observes that Obasanjo purposely made friends with select top journalists when he came on board. This he noted, was to temper the public perception of high-handedness on the part of his regime, in the aftermath of the forceful acquisition of *Daily Times* and the Kaduna based *New Nigerian*. Says Babarinsa:

It was at this period that Obasanjo consolidated his relationship with some of Nigeria's leading journalists. He made Mallam Adamu Ciroma, former editor of *New Nigerian* newspaper, Governor of the Central Bank. He forged a lifelong friendship with the likes of Stanley Macebuh, Onyema Ugochukwu, Turi Mohammed, Felix Adenaike, Innocent Oparadike, Saka Fagbo, Tola Adeniyi, Segun Osoaba, Henry Odukamaiya and Lade Bonuola.

Ugochukwu (2014, p.54), however, clarifies this contention, noting that it was his friend, Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, who became National Security Adviser (NSA) under the Obasanjo democratic government, who introduced him to the former President. Ugochukwu and Gusau had a longstanding relationship, dating back to the Babangida years. It was part of the goodwill between both men that crystallised into Mammah's earlier release from incarceration by the secret police. Explaining how he joined the Obasanjo Presidential Campaign Organisation in 1998, Ugochukwu recounts: My friend General Aliyu Gusau who is now Minister of Defence, asked me to come and work on the publicity team. I could not say no to him. He and I drove over to see Obasanjo. We had a chat for a while... Throughout the campaign, I worked closely with him. There was a time he asked me to move to Otta Farms. I could not do that because my family was in Lagos. It was a great experience working for Obasanjo.

Fortuitously, Ugochukwu never severed relationships with his colleagues, even after his retirement. He had a core of young journalists with whom he regularly exchanged ideas on media matters and current affairs. In 1995 when Nigeria was planning to host the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) youth football championship for instance, Ugochukwu's media outfit was awarded rights to produce the official brochure. He polled his younger friends from within and outside *Daily Times*, to articulate the editorial content of the brochure. Unfortunately, the tournament was called off. Some of Ugochukwu's young friends had also helped out when Ugochukwu conceived of the book project, *Power and Governance: The Legacy of Dr Michael Okpara* a collection of essays on the erstwhile Premier of Eastern Nigeria. The book was edited by Ugochukwu and published in 1997. Some of these journalists constituted the core of Ugochukwu's team for the present task of political communication. Olusunle (2006, p.15) notes:

He didn't have to look very far, therefore, before putting together a crack team to brainstorm on the challenge of repackaging and marketing Obasanjo for the big task ahead. Segun Ayobolu (former Chief Press Secretary and later Special Adviser to Governor Ahmed Bola Tinubu of Lagos State); Emeka Nwosu (former Special Assistant to the first President of the Senate in the Fourth Republic, Senator Evan Enwerem) and Femi Olatunde (Senior Manager in the Office of the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN), were in the team.

There were also Louis Okoroma (former Personal Assistant to Chief Tony Anenih in the Federal Ministry of Works); Tony Idigo (former Bureau Chief of the Daily Times, Abuja) and my good self, among others.

This is not forgetting Reuben Abati (former Chairman of the Editorial Board of *The Guardian*) and Chukwuma Nwoko, who was also on the staff of the same organisation. Every evening, the team assembled in Ugochukwu's home, to discuss the Obasanjo project, to conceive of how best to reposition him in the eyes of a people already very suspicious of the military. This paranoia was aggravated by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, ostensibly won by the Moshood Kasimawo Olawale Abiola. That election, frequently described as the freest and fairest presidential election in Nigeria, was annulled with a stroke of the pen by Babangida. It was in Ugochukwu's sitting room that we coined the slogan and pay-off line of that campaign: "Obasanjo, The Leader You Can Trust." We probed libraries and archives and generated essays, feature stories and commentaries on Obasanjo and his endeavours since he came into limelight as a public servant. Notably, he served as Federal Commissioner for Works (which is now referred to as Minister), under the administration of Yakubu Gowon, and Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters, before succeeding Mohammed. Under Ugochukwu's guidance, we produced flyers, handbills, posters, billboards and booklets for mass circulation, to begin some re-orientation of the citizenry.

Ugochukwu subsequently deployed this writer to Obasanjo's Otta base, as Campaign Press Attaché. A press photographer (Tumo Ojelabi, a former *Daily Times* staffer and perhaps the first university graduate to be employed in a media house in Nigeria) and Taiwo Akinyemi, a videographer, were also recruited into the press team of the campaign. These three, accompanied Obasanjo on his cross-country shuttles on consultation missions and campaigns. Defying the inadequacies of telecommunications at that time (before the advent of mobile telephony), the team managed to file news stories, backed by images and videos, which kept Obasanjo regularly in the public consciousness. As the campaign progressed, a number of experienced journalists joined or were co-opted, as the case may be. Chris Mammah, who had left *The Punch* to establish *The Week* magazine, formally came on board as Ugochukwu's deputy, while Farouk Omar Ibrahim who was General Manager, Northern Operations of *Daily Times*, based in Kaduna, was co-opted. Emeka Ihedioha, was named liaison person in Abuja, to help reach out to the media whenever Obasanjo the presidential candidate, had engagements in the federal capital territory. In as many instances as possible, these publicists were accommodated in

various government departments and agencies upon the emergence of Obasanjo as president.

Presidential Communicator

Upon Obasanjo's inauguration as President on May 29, 1999, Ugochukwu was appointed Special Adviser on National Orientation and Public Affairs (NOPA). This entailed the excision of the National Orientation Agency, (NOA) from the Federal Ministry of Information, and its transfer to the Presidency, as an arm of the office of the President. Obasanjo needed a buffer to his media office, taking advantage of the high quality human resource component of the campaign publicity team headed by Ugochukwu. The National Orientation Agency, therefore, had a "Public Affairs" brief affixed to it. This culminated in the new creation, NOPA. Ugochukwu conceived of a campaign for national rebirth "to bring about genuine renaissance in our country", (Ugochukwu, 1999, p.1). The campaign was to "focus on promoting and deepening the virtues of democracy and on mass education to heighten citizens' awareness of their rights as well as their obligations".

The campaign, Ugochukwu further said, was to spread the message of the new dawn, to all nooks and crannies of the country. In the new order, the new democratic government aimed to dissociate itself from the dictatorship, corruption and the attendant heckling of the people, which characterised the previous administrations. A publication titled "The Nigerian Declaration of Human Responsibilities" was also launched at the event. Ugochukwu's brave effort to prosecute the campaign for national rebirth which had an accountability forum subset, was, however, stymied by the establishment. The accountability forum required that public officers, elected and appointed, render to their people, accounts of their stewardship within the period they had been appointed. The Nigerian parliament was specifically opposed to the idea which, they opined, pitted them against their constituents. Representatives of the electorate, feared confronting their constituents at town hall meetings, initiated as part of the campaign for national rebirth. Resources needed for the sustained prosecution of the project were asphyxiated at the level of appropriation by the parliament and the concept of rebirth prematurely interred.

Pioneer Chairman, NDDC

In December 2000, Obasanjo appointed Ugochukwu Chairman of the newly created NDDC, which replaced the moribund Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). Ugochukwu was the very first person to be appointed to the chairmanship position of the organisation under the new dispensation. The mission statement

of the NDDC was: "To facilitate the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful." (Usen, 2003, p.5). In other words, the principal responsibility of the NDDC, was to engender the creation of an environment in which all the agencies of development in the Niger Delta area, namely: the NDDC, the Federal Government, the State Governments, the Local Governments, the Oil and Gas companies, will synergise their activities towards the common goal of rapid and sustainable transformation of the Region. Member states of the NDDC are: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. Its headquarters is in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital.

Despite the challenges of pioneering the all-important agency, Ugochukwu maintained very close contact with his primary constituency, the media. With Lagos retaining its longstanding position as the hub of the media in Nigeria, Ugochukwu was a regular caller in the former Nigerian capital. He visited media houses and hosted press meetings with proprietors, editors, columnists, line editors and so on from time to time. These interactions were not only about the NDDC, but about governance and government at the centre, and to seek the understanding and support of the press, for the administration. From these encounters, he distilled briefs which were documented and brought to the attention of the President. In a way, he sustained his Public Affairs schedule, side by side with his job in NDDC. For the avoidance of doubt, a Rapid Response Team (RRT) under the auspices of NOPA, continued to meet regularly in Ugochukwu's absence and to pursue the interpretation of government's policies and plans in the media. The team comprised experienced journalists serving in and out of government, who shared the vision of the new democratic ferment.

Ahead of the commencement of a global conference on the development and conservation of wetlands across the world in the United States of America, (USA) in 2002, Ugochukwu hosted a press luncheon with Nigerian journalists in the USA, next to the Nigerian Consulate in New York. The event was attended by the Consul-General of Nigeria to USA at the time, Ambassador Segun Apata. Others who attended include Nigeria's incumbent Minister of Sports, Sunday Dare (who worked with the Voice of America, VOA, Hausa Service); Laolu Akande (Media Adviser to Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, who was the New York correspondent of *The Guardian*) and Gbenga Ayeni (former *Daily Times* journalist and professor of communications at the East Connecticut University). The meeting was to enlist the diaspora arm of the Nigerian media, in the positive representation of the new democratic administration in Nigeria, in the eyes of the international community. Democracy in Nigeria was newly born; he noted and should be assisted to grow.

Spokesman for the Obasanjo Re-Election Campaign

Against the backdrop of the job Ugochukwu continued to do in the service of democracy and the Obasanjo administration, he was recalled before the commencement of the President's reelection campaign early 2003. Much as Obasanjo's PDP was in power, the party was not going to undermine the potential threat of the opposition, especially from the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP) which fielded Muhammadu Buhari in what was to be his first attempt at contesting the presidency. Ugochukwu worked with a more broad-based team on this assignment, which included volunteers and government officials selected from government agencies and departments in the media sector. Obasanjo won the election and Ugochukwu returned to his job in the NDDC. His subsisting appointment was for an initial term of four years, billed to end on December 21, 2004. Ugochukwu politely turned down an offer from Obasanjo, for the renewal of his chairmanship of the NDDC, by another four years, at the expiration of his term in office. The President wanted the new agency fully settled, to mitigate the recurrence of failures and stillbirths which characterised similar agencies in the past. Ugochukwu's argument, however, was that the number of states which were served by the Commission, were nine. The chairmanship of the NDDC was to be rotated in alphabetical order among the member states. If he, Ugochukwu, served a second term, it will take 72 years for someone else from Abia, his home state, to aspire to the leadership of the Commission again. This could be unnerving for some stakeholders and opponents of the administration. It is a measure of the confidence Obasanjo reposed in him that he was asked to continue to lead the NDDC, after the expiration of his term of office, while government looked out for replacements for him and other members of the Board. Ugochukwu stayed on as virtual Sole Administrator of the Commission, for about five months. Ugochukwu (2020), voiced his pain about the absence of leadership continuity in the NDDC, after he left:

... I served my full term as Chairman of the Board. More, I served even beyond my term, because when our tenure ended on December 21, 2004, I was asked to stay on and take charge of the Commission, until a new Board was inaugurated. So I stayed until early May 2005. In the 20 year history of the NDDC, I happen to be the only Chairman who has completed his tenure, which for me, is a matter of real sadness.

The story of the leadership hiccups in the NDDC has not been any better since Ugochukwu made this observation. The organisation has barely had a stable management team since the re-election of Muhammadu Buhari as President in 2019.

Back to the Beat: Director of Public Communication in the Presidency

President Obasanjo appointed Ugochukwu Adviser on Public Communication at the conclusion of his tour of duty in NDDC, in May 2005. The President desired more concordance in the management and coordination of government information by his lieutenants. He wanted the kind of synergy where government officials would not be seen as working at cross purposes in the public eye. To this extent, Obasanjo coined a "Presidential Committee on Public Communication, PCPC," with Ugochukwu, his adviser, as anchor person. The membership of the Committee included select ministers and heads of departments and agencies, and a few presidential aides. To underscore the importance President Obasanjo attached to the initiative, the Chief of Staff to the President, Abdullahi Mohammed, made available one of the meeting rooms in the Office of the President, for the regular engagements of the Committee. Part of the aims of the body, was to ensure that government officials knew something about what was happening in every other ministry or agency, so that they could speak authoritatively from a position of information, even in the event of an ambush by the media. Ministers including Eytayo Lambo (Professor and Minister of Health) and Oby Ezekwesili (Education) were members of the Committee.

Campaign for Abia Rebirth, CARE

In October 2006, Onyema Ugochukwu resigned his appointment in The Presidency, to contest the governorship of Abia State, on the platform of the PDP. With the background of his endeavours as NDDC Chairman which had brought tangible development to Abia where the incumbent administration in the state failed, a broad spectrum of people from his state, brought pressure on him to run. The project was christened Campaign for Abia Rebirth, (CARE). This was against the canvas that the state desired rigorous rejuvenation and regeneration after the incumbent administration exited from office. Ugochukwu won the primaries of his party. He ran a very well received campaign across the 17 local government areas in the state. The campaign was issue-based. Ugochukwu demonstrated pan-Nigerianism, by involving respectable professionals who were not necessarily from Abia State, in the project. He contested against Theodore Ahamaefule, Chief of Staff to the outgoing Governor Orji Uzor Kalu, who ran on the platform of the PPA, in the 2007 gubernatorial polls. The election results as released

by INEC, however, ran counter to entries on the original result sheets from each polling unit in the state, made available by PDP agents. There began a long-drawn legal tussle which kept Ugochukwu and his legal team in court for two years, beginning from 2007. Reminiscing on that effort, Ugochukwu, (2014, p.54) says:

We had great ideas about what we could do with the state and how we could advance it. We tried to sell the idea. It did not work and I did not become the governor... I would not blame it on the people, but on the system. Ultimately, one felt God did not want it. I tried my best but it didn't happen.

Not one to cry over spilt milk, he picked up himself and has continued to contribute to the development of his primordial vocation, journalism and the country at large. He is a distinguished Fellow of the NGE and a Member of the Board of Trustees (BOT) of the Guild. He once said: ... I have refused to be a veteran journalist. I have not written for some time now but I intend to sit down and maybe write an account of my journey through this life. I don't think I have the talent for business or trading. I might as well sit somewhere and write things. Ugochukwu continues to participate in activities organised by the Guild, including conventions and other programmes.

Statesman

Ugochukwu was one of the eminent Nigerians nominated to the National Conference of 2014, under the administration of Goodluck Jonathan. He was initially sceptical and didn't believe the Conference was going to achieve anything tangible. His views changed subsequently and he believes the Conference overshot his expectations: I am very impressed with what that Conference achieved. There was a belief that we were going to disagree and then some groups would walk out. But we achieved the kind of consensus Nigerians in public never agreed on. We came up with a report that can change this country if implemented. (Ugochukwu, 2014, p.54). Sadly, despite the very well acknowledged quality of discourse and propositions from the Conference in the quest for equity, justice and fair play, the successor regime to Jonathan's, has not been able to revisit and implement suggestions from the conference.

Public Scholar

As a public intellectual, Ugochukwu has delivered public lectures at various fora, including his paper "The Development Crisis in the Niger

Delta Region: Constraints and Prospects” at the University of Lagos, in 2005. Another paper titled “Leadership and Good Governance in Nigeria,” was delivered at the eighth edition of the “Emeka Anyaoku Lecture Series,” in Umuahia, in 2018, among many others.

Awards, Honours and Recognitions

In 2006, Ugochukwu was conferred with the highly revered national honour of Commander of the Order of the Niger (CON) in recognition of his multifaceted contributions to national development. The same year, he also received an award from “Africa Leadership International,” for Africa Leadership Enterprise. He was honoured with a “Doctor of Law,” *Honoris Causa*, by the University of Uyo, in 2004 and also conferred in 2018 with an honorary doctorate by Gregory University, Uturu, Abia State, where he is Pro-Chancellor. Ugochukwu was a Member of the Council of the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE) from 1989 to 1994; Member, Nigerian Council for Management Education, (CMD) 1993 to 1994; Chairman, University of Nigeria Alumni Association, Lagos Branch, 1992 to 1994, among others. This is not forgetting the string of traditional honours he has received through his years of service from across the country. These include recognitions from Abia, Bayelsa, Cross River, Edo and Rivers States, among others. On the occasion of his 75th birthday in 2019, President Buhari, sent him a birthday message. Buhari applauded him for his “contributions to the vibrancy and dynamism of the Nigerian media, in spite of his background in Economics and working with the Central Bank of Nigeria”. The President noted that the experiences he aggregated working for home-based and foreign outfits were invaluable to the nation.

Conclusion

Onyema Ugochukwu has had a very successful, fulfilled multi-pronged career in journalism and communications, over five decades. This has straddled variegated mediums, nations, authorities and generations, in the public and private sectors, over time and space. He has contributed tremendously to the redefinition of a profession hitherto consigned to the unambitious. He has resisted the appellation “veteran” in the profession, despite being officially retired. It is hoped that this determination will propel him to continue to practise and to mentor and inspire generations to come. This becomes very germane in a milieu lacking salient institutional memory.

References

- Abati, R. (Ed.) (2004). *The whole truth: Selected Editorials of The Guardian: 1983-2003*. Lagos: Guardian Newspapers Ltd, pp. vii-xv.
- Babarinsa, D. (2013). Obasanjo, His Press and the Loneliness of Power. In O. Akinkugbe, A. Joda, O. Ibidapo-Obe, F. Okonofua and B. Idowu (Eds.), *Olusegun Obasanjo: The Presidential Legacy: 1999-2007*. Ibadan: Bookcraft, pp. 234-244.
- Buhari, M. (2020). Buhari Congratulates former NDDC Chairman, Onyema Ugochukwu at 75. Retrieved July 14, 2021 from <https://newsdiaryonline.com/buhari-congratulates-former-nddc-chairman-onyema-ugochukwu-at-75/>
- Jose, I.B. (1986). *Walking a tight rope: Power play in Daily Times*. Lagos: University Press Ltd, pp. 127-134.
- Koyi, F. (2011). *Spotlighting Nigeria's outstanding people and professions since 1900*. Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd, pp. 443-447.
- Nnadi, A. (2002). *The fire within*. Port Harcourt: Veezek Books, p.i.
- Ogunbiyi, Y. (2018). My Life as Pro-Chancellor and My Years At *The Guardian, Daily Times*. Retrieved August 8, 2019 from <https://theintererview.ng/2018/06/19/my-life-as-pro-chancellor-and-my-years-at-the-guardian-daily-times-yemi-ogunbiyi>.
- Olagunju, S. (Ed.) (1996). *The leader at 70: How we have weathered the storm: 1926-1996*. Lagos: Times Books Ltd, pp 11-103.
- Olusunle, T. & Okereke, D. (2009). The journalist as a patriot: Onyema Ugochukwu at 65. Retrieved July 14, 2021 from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2009/11/the-journalist-as-a-patriot-onyema-ugochukwu-at-65/>
- Olusunle, T. (2006). *On the trail of history: A reporter's notebook on Olusegun Obasanjo*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, pp. 7-20.
- Olusunle, T. (2017). From the theatre phase to the media space: Interrogating the vocational odyssey of Yemi Ogunbiyi. In *EJOTMAS: Ekpoma Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*, 6 (1&2), 422-438.
- Olusunle, T. (2019). The print media and the development of Nigerian literature: 1980-2000. University of Abuja, Unpublished Ph.D thesis, pp. 76-97.
- Ugochukwu, O. (1999). Address at the National launching of the campaign for National rebirth. September 10, 1999.
- Ugochukwu, O. (2014). Why I abandoned CBN for journalism. *Daily Sun* (Nigerian), November 17, 2014, pp.53-54.
- Ugochukwu, O. (2020). Re: Time to scrap NDDC. Retrieved July 14, 2021 from <https://guardian.ng/opinion/re-time-to-scrap-nddc/>
- Usen, A. (Ed.) (2003). *The journey so far: NDDC June 2001-November 2003*. Lagos: Workstation Ltd, pp. 5.