

Communiqué

Issued at the end of a Two-Day Workshop on “Using the Freedom of Information Act for Investigative Reporting”, held on Tuesday, October 31 and Wednesday, November 1, 2023, at Palms 77 Hotel, Ibadan, Oyo State.

Introduction

Media Rights Agenda (MRA) convened a two-day workshop on “Using the Freedom of Information Act for Investigative Reporting” on Tuesday, October 31, and Wednesday, November 1, 2023, at Palms 77 Hotel, Ibadan in Oyo State. It was attended by 30 participants made up of media professionals from broadcast, print and online media organizations from different states across south-west geo-political zone.

The workshop was aimed at sensitizing participating journalists and building their capacity to effectively use the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act for investigative reporting by familiarizing them with the key provisions of the Act, how to make requests for information under the Act to increase their chances of success, and the enforcement mechanisms and options available to them whenever they are wrongfully denied access to any information requested.

The workshop was organized by Media Rights Agenda with support from the MacArthur Foundation through the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ) under the Collaborative Media Engagement for Development, Inclusion and Accountability (CMEDIA) Project, a multi-level intervention that supports media independence, improved transparency, accountability, and good governance in state and local governments with more public awareness on the need for accountability, and amplified marginalised voices.

The workshop had plenary presentations and break-out sessions, which addressed different topics including: an Overview and Elements of Investigative Reporting; The Role of Records and Documents in Investigative Reporting; Understanding the Freedom of Information Act, 2011; The FOI Act and Investigative Reporting; and How Journalists and the Media Can Use the FOI Act.

Other topics treated are: Fact-checking and Investigative Reporting; Making Requests for Information Under the Freedom of Information Act; Deciding What Investigative Reports to Carry Out; Interviews in Investigative Reporting; and How to Present Stories from Investigative Reporting.

The workshop highlighted the importance of the Freedom of Information Act in empowering investigative journalists to access crucial information in the custody of public institutions and other non-governmental entities to which the Act applies.

Observations and Recommendations

Participants made a number of observations and recommendations, including the following:

- Although coverage of routine events by journalists has some value for the society as they inform members of the public about those events, which may be entertaining,

educational or informative in other ways, the excessive preoccupation with such routine reporting while neglecting more in-depth and impactful investigative reporting that help to ensure transparency, accountability, and ultimately, good governance, undermines the power and effectiveness of the media.

- The FOI Act is a powerful tool for information gathering for journalists and other media professionals and can significantly improve the quality of routine and in-depth media reporting. Accordingly, journalists should make the effort to read the Act and familiarize themselves with it to enable them to use it effectively for enhanced reporting.
- Furthermore, critical media stakeholders such as journalism and mass communication training institutions, media support and media development organizations, media professional bodies and associations as well as media organizations and newsrooms are encouraged to devote more time, effort and resources into creating awareness about the Act among journalists and building their capacity to utilize the Law.
- In addition to the above, in order to engender better and more impactful reporting of various issues, particularly those relating to transparency, accountability, good governance and development, participants urged these key stakeholders to similarly put more effort and resources into providing continuous training for journalists in other areas such as investigative reporting techniques, fact-checking and information verification tools and approaches as well as the use of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies which can aid their work.
- Journalists, particularly those engaged in investigative reporting, should routinely mine available documents, records and data, including the annual budgets of Federal and State Governments, their audited public accounts, and other reports for information. They should analyze such documents, records and data to ascertain their level of compliance with applicable laws, rules, regulations, codes and other standards. Any identified breaches should be the basis of reporting aimed at holding the government involved accountable.
- Journalists should take advantage of various tools, which are available digitally, online and offline, which can enhance their work, including in conducting research; analysing data; verifying information, among others, by identifying such tools, obtaining them and learning how to use them in order to improve their reporting.
- Journalists should endeavour to give greater prominence to issues affecting women and other marginalized group. Women and members of other such marginalized groups should also be routinely reflected in news stories as important news sources in addition to focusing attention on how they are impacted by government policies, programmes and actions.

The participants thanked Media Rights Agenda for organizing the workshop and the MacArthur Foundation and Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism for sponsoring it.

Adopted in Ibadan on Wednesday, the 1st Day of November, 2023.