The Media and its Reportage on Matters of Taxation: A Paradigm Shift

Hon. Phenyo Butale (PhD)
Member of Botswana Parliament and Pan African Parliament
Tel: +26776644742
Email: parksmrparks@yahoo.com

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The General role of the media

• Educate/create awareness
• Agenda setting
• Oversight /watchdog role – the media as the fourth estate
• Media playing a think tank role mostly in developing countries
Educative role of media/awareness creation

• Generally speaking the media plays a critical role in raising awareness on a wide array of issues such as the importance of tax and ills such as tax evasion

• Educating the populace on the importance of/ for example the need to pay tax as a prerequisite for governmental ability to deliver services

• In the context of raising awareness, the media is expected to bring to the fore policies and other pronouncements that govern or give effect to taxation in a particular jurisdiction to ensure compliance
Media’s Agenda setting role

• It is universally accepted that the media shapes people attitudes towards different aspects of life
• In terms of public discourse the media plays a huge role in determining topics for discussion and are therefore able to influence government policy trajectory
• Media active participation through expert analysis and opinion pieces is able to determine a country or government development agenda and/or priorities
Oversight /watchdog role – the media as the fourth estate

• In carrying out its oversight role on tax issues or matters the media has to critically scrutinise tax regimes across the continent and identify gaps as well as establish best international practices

• Exposing bad tax practices such as tax evasion

• Hold the government accountable for the optimal utilization of resources

• The media has to be the conduit through which critical voices are heard “can the subaltern speak” asks gender and postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak. And I ask you scribes can the poor masses of Africa speak on tax administration? Do they have a voice at all on such an important matter? Have these voices been captured at all?
Media playing a think tank role mostly in developing countries

- Think Tanks play a fundamental role in shaping policy agendas through research and scientific evidence.

- This is a mammoth task that calls for highly skilled personnel and resources to keep up with the ever rapidly changing local and global trends in various fields.

- The media in Africa has the added burden I would like to argue of carrying out this responsibility at a difficult time, which some has termed the “post truth society” {with the advent of fake news and social media technologies } yet newsrooms are getting younger with more experienced scribes choosing more lucrative jobs on the “dark side”.
Challenges

• The ever dwindling level of expertise in our newsroom due to the high staff turn over
• Social media technologies present both an opportunity and a challenge more especially with regard to reporting complex matters such as taxation
  
  • The advent of Big Data or Data revolution also places the bar very high in terms of expertise and the ability to optimally utilise large and diverse data that is at our disposal at every second.

• Inconsistent and often times contradictory tax regimes across the continent with no clear cut African best practice or standard – commend ATAF efforts to come up with an African Model law on taxation

• the post truth era and the competition Journalists get from other sources of information such as citizen journalists, social media and fake news
The Fiction of Tax Reporting: the answer to the false dichotomy between Taxation and tax payers

• “But words are things, and a small drop of ink, falling like dew upon a thought, produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions think” (Byron, 1973)

• “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is above all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything” (Conrad, 1985)
This is a call for an adoption of a story telling methodology and approach in our reporting e.g. The world bank “voices of the poor” is a case in point.

Place a human face to an otherwise predominantly quantitative area of research; balance it with a more qualitative approach anchored upon the lived realities of African people whose livelihoods are negatively affected by lapses in tax administration.

Translate complex numbers often cited by tax experts into an understandable language- how many schools could have been built, hospitals, medicine etc – provide political and economic contexts

By capturing the voices of the poor masses and locating the tax administration story within their everyday lived realities makes them a partner in taxation and tax revenue collection.
Conclusion

• It is critical that all stakeholders, the media included play their role in driving reforms in tax administration

• Leading African writer and intellectual Chinua Achebe in his essay “Africa Is People” (2009) underscores the value that experiential data can provide in complementing mathematical calculations and estimations.

• He told experts at the twenty-fifth anniversary meeting of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1989:

  Here you are, spinning your fine theories, to be tried out in your imaginary laboratories. You are developing new drugs and feeding them to a bunch of laboratory guinea pigs and hoping for the best. I have news for you. Africa is not fiction. Africa is people, real people. Have you thought of that? You are brilliant people, world experts. You may even have the very best intentions. But have you thought, really thought, of Africa as people? (157)
Conclusion

• In the quotation above, Achebe reminds us that Africans have stories to tell about economic interventions such as structural adjustment programs that were introduced in Africa by multinational bodies like the OECD and the International Monetary Fund – the IMF.

• To illustrate his point, Achebe relates the Nigerian experience of structural adjustments, which resulted in the country’s minimum wage plummeting “in value from the equivalent of fifteen British pounds a month to five pounds” (157). He argues that this plummet is “not a lab report; it is not a mathematical exercise... [it is] someone’s income” (157). I am saying telling this story from this perspective makes more sense to the African audience.