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Toward Global Ethics: Exploring the Perspectives of Local Media Stakeholders

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Abstract

The search for global media ethics is ongoing, and it is especially relevant for Africa. However, much of the search concerns reconceptualizing the traditional ethical principles, while emphasizing fresh philosophical foundations that use indigenous values alongside global principles. This article contends that in addition to scholars and journalists—the only visible self-motivated search enthusiasts—no fewer than seven other active players exist, and the interests of these players (news makers, media content consumers, media users, media owners, media professional associations, government/media regulators, and media non-governmental organizations) are instrumental in the ongoing global efforts to seek global media ethics. Careful articulation of the stakeholders' perspectives, to avoid conflict with any eventual broad-based principles, will ensure that the search for a global ethics from the continent is not lost on the path to reality.

Keywords: Afrocentricism, Afrocomplementarism, global media ethics, Nigeria, performance, stakeholders.

Introduction

Journalism practice is crucial for human society. The media constitute a source of "significant information" (Blake, 1979, p. 226), and the sharing of this information with the public has transformed its functions. The media's "integrative and interactive capabilities" (Boadu, 1981, p. 193) and their function as "a bridge to the political environment" (Light, 1991, p. 86) are instrumental for sociopolitical change. This important role has necessitated the setting up of performance criteria and rules of conduct. Professionalism in journalism practice can only be

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achieved through "adherence to basic morality that acknowledges responsibilities along with freedom" (Harrison, 1974, p. 264). For these reasons, the current search for a global media ethics that would extend these criteria to media around the world is justified.

In this article it is argued that the ongoing search for global media ethics does not adequately contextualize the environment within which journalists operate. Media ethics are applied within specific political, legal, and economic contexts. The journalist needs a secure job with good pay, which depends primarily on the financial health of one's employers and the relationship with them. To enjoy his right to freedom of expression, the journalist needs security guarantees and a justice system that is statutorily provided by government. To ensure she does not overstep journalistic bounds in the course of her duties, there need to be rules and regulations, the custodians of which are either the regulatory agencies or professional associations or both. For the journalist to produce well-balanced reports, he relies on the cooperation of news makers and news consumers. When citizens lose interest in public dialogue, the task of the journalist becomes a burden. The success of the functioning of the public information, deemed so crucial in a democratic system, depends largely on the cooperation of media audiences (Graber, 1986). In the contemporary media environment, journalists' control over their professional destiny is more often than not determined by forces outside their territory. Factors such as media ownership structure, type of government, audience profile, and so forth all combine to determine the journalist's performance. Any ethics that forms the basis of the journalist's conduct and performance must consider these factors.

In the present era, factors impacting upon journalists' performance are increasingly global in nature. However, a global ethical system still evades us, due to the perceived ineffectiveness of any existing universals, whether legal or constitutional. As a result of the crucial nature of communication, international organizations and countries around the world adopt constitutions, which are instruments and covenants to guarantee the right to seek, receive, and impart information. Brumback (1991, p. 354), however, notes that "a government program that does nothing more than keep behavior legal . . . would not be a *bona fide* ethics program. It would be more of a law enforcement program. Laws and regulations are not the answer to keeping behaviour above the bottom line of ethics." This statement, which has also been demonstrated through research (Bruce, 1994, p. 245–251), attests to the fact that laws constitute only a partial guarantee, and that to ensure proper ethical conduct, something else would be needed.

Behind the search for a global media ethics is the supposition that journalistic standards can be used as a measure of media performance. Performance in this respect can be defined from one of three perspectives—internal or external or both. When it is internal, the media are concerned mainly with the in-house

regulation and running of the business. The external dimension focuses on the way mass media contents are able to change or reinforce the attitudes, behavior, and values of the audiences (Spitulnik, 1993, p. 296), thereby foregrounding the public interest as an ethical imperative.

The values that drive journalists' performance will be those that are commonly held by their audiences (Sorauf, 1957, p. 619). They are universally shared private interests (Benditt, 1973, p. 293), held by a large number of people scattered across the world. However, the search for a global ethics has to tackle the dilemma the journalist is most likely to face when the public interest does not reflect the majority view, but, rather, represents a superior interest. Unlike the majoritarian standpoint, where the interest of everybody is involved and everybody is believed to be advocating that interest or can be seen to be doing so, the superior interest proposition stresses that something is in the public interest because it commands special priority owing to its inherent wisdom and desirability. For instance, if the government of a country decides to import food to alleviate starvation, the action can be considered wise but may not be in the public interest. The majority choice advocates can argue that the money spent on importation would be better utilized in the public interest if it were used for building local rice farms.

The search for a global ethical scheme has conceptual and philosophical dimensions. One striking area is the intrinsic belief that a truly global ethical system will be objective, where objectivity is operationalized in terms of journalists' ability to give every segment of the audience an equal right to be heard and seen, to read or to react. This means that moral guidelines will translate into conduct that can contribute to peace and equality. Cooperative efforts in the search for any globally acceptable ethical system cannot be overemphasized. Such efforts are more germane in the mass media where the interests involved are multidimensional and variegated. The universality that must characterize the eventual moral system makes important the contributions of individuals or institutions that have close connections with the contents of the mass media. The all-inclusive imperative that this article is promoting will be a departure from the current minority paradigm which severely limits the number of contributors in the ongoing search, not only on the global scale but also in the African context.

This all-inclusive approach does not support any known African contributions to the global media ethics search. Much of the search energy on the continent is concentrated on reconceptualizing the traditional ethical systems, with an emphasis on theoretical foundations that use indigenous values alongside global standards. While this perspective obviously exposes the potential benefits of these local ideals in an international setting, it is, however, expressed only within the context of the journalist's responsibility to her audience, with no appreciable reference to other stakeholders whose interests are also crucial. This article

addresses this shortcoming and presents a synopsis of these interests to demonstrate how relevant they are in the search for global ethics from Africa.

Africa's Contributions to Global Media Ethics

Assumptions that the Western moral system is universally applicable correspond with the inappropriate, and previously dominant, paradigm championed by Lerner (1958) and Schramm (1964). This paradigm stated that the West possessed an endowment of knowledge, entrepreneurial skill, and the mass media, which, judging from successful application in countries in Europe and America, could be replicated in developing nations.

The weakness of the Western system as a universal archetype has engendered the movement that puts developing countries on the scholarship radar. The movement in Africa extends from the extremism of *Afrocentricism* (Verharen, 1995; Winters, 1994; Miller, 1997) to a milder form that could be called *Afrocomplementarism*. According to Asante (1991), afrocentricity creates a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African. "It is also a systematic displacement of foreign paradigms and their conscious replacement with the ways that are useful and of interest to Africa" (Mazama, 2001, p. 388). Afrocentric theorists stress that any research or conceptual formulation that pertains to Africa or Africa-related diasporas would be carried out within the African context, whether or not it is in line with the norms of the Western tradition of enquiry (Reviere, 2001).

Applying Afrocentricism in the search for global media ethics can be counter productive. While the idea has the potential to encourage Africans to be centripetally disposed, the epistemology of Afrocentrism is fragile. It is seemingly a protest philosophy that strives for elimination by substitution and promotes some provincial interests to the detriment of the globalizing world. The implication of globalization is that the journalists' audience has expanded to include a range of ethnic, religious, social, political, and cultural diversities. The Afrocentric standpoint is also fragile because its proponents have failed to explain the political, social, and economic structures that drive this perspective. Such structures are commonplace in the Western ethical system, and this has been a reason for the level of acceptance it enjoys as a guide to media performance.

The Afrocomplementary perspective, in contrast, fundamentally agrees that the world is truly globalizing and that the concomitant challenges require a comprehensive solution, the attributes of which reflect the diversity of world cultures. Contributions from different cultural areas of the world are harmonized to produce an acceptable, broad-based system.

The contributions of Rao & Wasserman (2007) typify the complementarist viewpoint and come in the form of the multidisciplinary concept of postcolonial

theory that scowls at the glaring diminutive attention accorded non-Western theoretical systems. Postcolonial theory attempts to construct a critical system that explores the history of colonialism, and reinscribes the values, indigenous practices, and models that are alien to the West into the debate about a transnational media ethics. The theory does not advocate an outright overthrow of the Eurocentric system, but, rather, severely criticizes the "parochialism" (Shome & Hedge, 2002, p. 265) associated with it. It is a way of showing the world that non-Western perspectives also have the potential to contribute to the ongoing debate. Rao and Wasserman (2007, p. 34) stress:

> The strength of postcolonial theory is that it provides us with a critical framework that validates the local epistemologies necessary for the formulation of global ethics, and acknowledges the unequal power relationships in which various cultures and nations are historically positioned.

The emphasis of this complementarist approach is that these three vital elements—the history of colonialism, indigenous values, and power differentials among nations and peoples—exert influence on the ethical conduct of professional communicators and journalists. Evidence from two ethical subtheories—*ubuntu* from South Africa and *ahimsa* from India—were provided by Rao and Wasserman (2007) to justify their arguments. *Ahimsa* dissuades journalists from publishing contents that can harm their audience. *Ubuntu* is consistent with the belief that ethical` perspectives are closely related to culture. This subtheory offers a view of truth, authority, and justice on the platform of humanity whereby one's interests only obtain meaning when the interests of others are involved and pursued. The interdependence of the individual and community (Christians, 2004) is embedded in *communitarianism* (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005) and the idea that the community is "at the centre of life" (Israel, 1992, p. 412). Such an approach legitimizes grassroots journalism and encourages the interaction of journalists with their audiences.

Errors in the Search for Global Media Ethics

Critical perspectives on the search for global media ethics have sent a signal that the emphasis of the search has to be changed. This is a fundamental challenge to the way media ethics conceive of audiences; an audience is now defined as the consumers of media "scattered across the world" (Ward, 2005a, p. 4). Ward (2005b) corroborates the journalist-audience imperative when he states that "journalists should see themselves as agents of a global public sphere" and "the global journalist's primary loyalty is to the information needs of world citizens." Theories and perspectives that are geared toward developing an acceptable global media ethics have zeroed in on journalists and their audiences. This

is a constant error related to "a consistent pattern that marginalizes or overemphasizes certain sections of the population" (Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdock, 1999, p. 42).

Continued prioritization of journalists and their audiences, to the neglect of other stakeholders, can turn the search for global media ethics into a linear process. The media industry is an agglomeration of stakeholders of which journalists or scholars and their audiences are only a part. Besides that, what the journalist or media scholar views as misconduct may not be perceived the same way by other stakeholders in the trade, and prosecution for ethical misconduct is sometimes not based on the merit of the case but is, rather, largely a function of "public visibility of the offense" (Abbot, 1983, p. 859). This article, therefore, advocates a more inclusive approach to the search for global media ethics. Such an approach involves all the stakeholders in various categories, effectively adding value to the debate until there is an acceptable consensus. In this way the error is avoided of defining what is right and wrong in the media industry only from the perspective of journalists and their audiences.

This process involves harnessing the perspectives and interests of nine categories of stakeholders, with a view to determining how they affect journalists' ethical conduct in the public interest. This, perhaps, is what Ward (2005b) calls "coalition-building among journalists and interested parties with the aim of writing a global code of ethics that has wide-spread acceptance." The nine stakeholders are the following:

- *Media scholars*: By virtue of their training and detailed knowledge of media practice, they are obvious stakeholders. Media scholars are the self-motivated inspirers of the ongoing search for global media ethics.
- *Professional communicators*: These are the journalists who practice what the scholars teach them and who constitute the focus of the global search.
- *News makers*: These are the people in the news.
- *Media content consumers*: Without this category of subscribers, active readers, and free readers, the media business is at risk. Their views must be incorporated if the search for global ethics is to be successful.
- *Media users*: Their disposition can affect or influence the conduct of the journalist. They include political officeholders and those seeking office, advertisers and their agents, public relations officials, and the like.
- *Media owners:* Journalists are in the employ of media owners. In many African countries, media owners are in two categories: private and public. In publicly quoted businesses, stocks react to company performances. With regard to the media, journalists and other professional communicators are the perceived category of employees who drive the performances. The ethics behind their practice will therefore be of interest to the employers. This attitude is similar to that of limited liability companies, but public limited

companies are constrained by law to act not simply in public interest but also to be seen doing so.

- *Media professional associations*: These are dedicated to the promotion of a free press in democratic countries, advancing the interests of journalists and fostering excellence among them. Professional associations are the custodians of media ethics in many African countries.
- *Government/Regulatory agencies:* In most countries, governments, through regulatory agencies, are statutorily empowered to grant approvals for the registration of mass media as well as control them. Governments use many criteria for registering newspapers or granting broadcast licenses, but the overriding condition is that the media so licensed must operate in the public interest. Thus the public interest factor, which is also crucial in the quest for global media ethics, has made imperative the inclusion of government representatives in the search.
- *Media nongovernmental organizations:* These are usually privately funded, voluntary organizations that advance the rights and interests of journalists.

The point of such categorization is that although ethical perspectives are socially and culturally constructed, they are also embedded in political and economic interests (Gilman & Lewis, 1996), which are beyond the purview of journalists. A careful consideration and articulation of the interests and perspectives of the various stakeholders will raise the bar of participation in the ongoing debate and shift the status quo, which leaves media scholars and journalists as the only visible seekers of global media ethics.

A Synopsis of Interests and Perspectives of the Stakeholders

Media Scholars

The media scholars' category encompasses professional scholars whose major preoccupation is research and/or teaching and students. The interest of scholars in the global media ethics debate is based on the view that ethics can provide answers to the questions of human life. This view, in the words of Baumgarten (1982, p. 282), is one of professional responsibility and claims that "university teachers have a social obligation to help other citizens, both inside and outside the classroom." Lane (1985, p. 242) corroborates this, adding: "The perspective of the academic profession is the understanding of the environment and not the accomplishment of organizational goals." The current efforts provide media scholars the opportunity to help ordinary citizens who lack the knowledge of how they can be helped, especially in the area of the study of values, thus helping to reduce the unusually wide communication gap between academics and the public.

However, scholars should know that the output of the entire system can only be guaranteed by the partial contribution of each of its parts. Scholars need to recognize that there are other equally important elements whose interests have to be considered alongside those of scholars and journalists. It will involve a mechanism for behaviors (Glennan, 2002) in which media scholars, by virtue of their epistemological knowledge, will give direction to other media stakeholders. The starting point of the search, therefore, would be the progressive manner in which media scholars are able to organize and incorporate the interests of other stakeholders in the ongoing search.

One of the areas of challenges that media scholars would encounter is to identify the interests of the African journalism teacher. According to Golding (1979), Western ideology rather than media professionalism is largely a trait characteristic of journalism teaching in the Third World, and most journalism institutions in Africa are establishments that were designed as an extension of Western media. The African media institutions are under some "destructive influences" (Jimada, 1992, p. 367) of foreign consumption patterns and lifestyles, cultivated and promoted through increasing dependency on the West. Uncritically taking over these Western-oriented principles would add no value to the existing search for a transnational ethics.

The moral attitude of seeing oneself and the audience as members of a community with reciprocal commitments presents a potentially positive component of journalism curriculum and a charitable way of contributing to the debate on global media ethics. Journalism teachers, in addition to imparting professional skills, will task their students to examine life within the context of the dignity of humans. Student publications offer a golden opportunity for teachers to determine how students have aligned themselves on "the side of courtesy and fairplay" (Goldberg, 1945, p. 256), two core values that communitarian systems like *ubuntu* would support. It is the responsibility of the crafters of global media ethics to ensure that the contents they are coming out with are congruent with what students have been taught within such a communitarian framework. The potential of this framework is also demonstrated in the fact that it presents journalists as sociologists (Scher, 1999: 403), thus extending their depth of community epistemology that is capable of bringing about positive social change.

Journalists and Other Professional Communicators

Several issues concerning the well-being of the journalist would need to be thrashed out by writers of global media ethics, but one notable area would be that of corruption. Unfortunately, many journalists on the African continent are not well paid, resulting in corruption in the form of accepting gifts and bribery. A code of ethics directed at this misconduct obviously would aim to prevent such

tendencies. However, studies should be carried out to determine the underlying reasons for this misdemeanor and its gravity in the African context.

A close look at the present shows that offering food, drink, and other incentives or gifts to friends, visitors, and relatives upon invitation is consistent with the tradition and spirit of African hospitality among many ethnic groups on the continent. Such offering is often proof that the visitor is not rejected. In South Africa, such practice is common among the Nguni people (Hammond-Tooke, 1963). In western Zaire, quantitative evidence by researchers (Lux, 1972, pp. 174–175) exists to demonstrate the connection between visits and gift-giving. In Nigeria, this practice is noticeable among the three largest ethnic groups in the country—Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. The Igbo, for instance, have several ways of maintaining the equilibrium of the typical African social system, and hospitality is one of them. According to Uchendu (1964, p. 47), the Igbo "do this through the idiom of kola nut—the traditional Igbo medium of welcoming a guest and establishing (if the guest is being received for the first time) or reinforcing (if he is already known) their interaction rate." Kola nuts are only symbolic, as other forms of gifts are now used.

However, there is a caveat, which revolves around two pertinent questions. One: When does a gift turn into an inducement and when does an inducement translate into outright bribery in journalism practice? Two: How does a person describe a gift when the giver is an institution and not individuals as explained in the above examples? Ward (RAP 21, 2003) has alluded to an institutional example in Nigeria, where foreign journalists were alleged to have accepted government money to attend a ministerial news conference. Finding answers to these questions and others are beyond the scope of this article, but they are, together with several other unresolved questions, going to be among the most challenging areas in the search for global media ethics.

News Makers

The interests of news makers test media performance and pose a challenge for the search for global media ethics. The imbalance in global information flows has undermined an effective transnationalization of the media and is made manifest in the inability or refusal by the international media to portray equally the various regions and cultures of the world. The problem is compounded by Western media stereotypes of less developed countries and their cultures as unstable, invisible, irresponsive, and inconsequential (Wilhoit & Weaver, 1983; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984), and the presentation of Western culture as internationally acceptable. This has undermined cultural autonomy as people of the Third World struggle to find a voice in the international communication space. The low levels of integrity of transnational media with regard to cultural diversity, and the attendant perception of global media coverage as a form of cultural invasion, should

be a concern to those searching for global media ethics. A global system of media ethics should give the assurance that the cultural identity of groups, subgroups, and nations in Africa will be reflected in transnational mass media contents and will not be defamed. All the constituents of the mass media audience deserve some voice in the public communication space, and a global media ethics should strive toward bringing that about.

Media Content Consumers

A major revenue source of the media is the news consumer, and this is one of many reasons why one of the performance assessment criteria has been how the media are able to fulfill their responsibility in the public interest. With regard to the print media, McQuail (1992, p. 107) notes that "the more a newspaper is dependent on reader income, the more it will be constrained to please these readers and the less inclined to offer them unpopular or disagreeable news and views." The implication of this is that media performance is profit-driven and does not always respond to the general interest.

However, the media can argue: Well, we accept that our contents did not completely portray all the segments of the audience, but we were not established to achieve the interests or goals set by the citizens. This statement has some merit. McQuail (1992, p. 14) alludes to this point, stressing that even though the media may be broadly expected to serve the long-term interest of the public, they are not working for the public, adding that within this context, it is not appropriate to assess their performance on the basis of the achievement of goals in broad policy fields such as health, education, transportation, and agriculture. The challenge of global media ethics will be how to ensure balance between the social responsibility of the media and the interests of media content consumers that fund the media business.

Media Users

Holders and seekers of political office, public relations, and advertising practitioners are several categories of professionals and ordinary citizens that often use the media to reach out to the public. A few moral questions arise at this point: Will the media be fair enough to grant these users equal access? What happens to the users who also have ideological differences of opinion with the media but who are not as financially empowered as advertising agencies or politicians? What happens to press freedom where there is an overbearing influence of any of these users?

An insight into answers to these questions shows that the profit-driven, internally-set standards of the media have constrained the contents to reflect the interests of those who sponsor them, thus undermining the claim to press freedom by the media operating under the free market economy. The commercial objective

of profit making, which is in line with the patronage of these users, can conflict with ethics of editorial objectivity. The drafters of global media ethics have to consider the input of income from advertising, public relations sponsorship, and electioneering communication in developing countries, especially those in Africa. This input is getting increasingly important in view of the dwindling reader patronage occurring, in part, as a result of illiteracy and the low purchasing power of citizens.

Media Owners

Media owners are basically interested in business, not journalism. It may not make too much of a difference if they had been practicing journalists before attaining the ownership status. Apart from running a legal entity, they are also driven not by the moral values of journalism practice but by business ethics. One of the challenges the businessperson faces is where an "efficient" (Cragg, 2002, p. 113) way of accomplishing company goals and objectives (especially in terms of profits) conflicts with moral principles. The stockholder theory (Friedman, 1962, p. 133), in spite of its criticisms (Donaldson & Preston, 1995), explains the commercialism inherent in a business organization. In its original form, the theory asserts that as long as they operate by business rules, stockholders, as a means of making or increasing profits, can deploy capital through company managers who act as agents to achieve their goal. In other words, corporate responsibility is the use of scarce resources to do business that guarantees good profits, as long as it follows due process. The influence of commercial interests is not peculiar to the media industry; it is also evident in several other professions, such as medicine and archaeology (Lynott, 1997). Media commercialism and profit making have engendered an inevitable clash between the ethics of business and the moral values of media practice. The resolution of this tension presents a challenge to global media ethics. The preponderance of commercialism over professionalism is an indication that the interests of media owners, represented by their appointed managers, should be considered in the ongoing global media ethics search.

Media Professional Associations

Different types of associations exist with differing interests. Some are based on gender, some on industry subsectors, many on journalistic genres, several on staff cadres, and so forth. However, the tendency in many African countries is to have an umbrella body that serves the interests of all journalists. In Nigeria, this body is called the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). In Ghana, the 60-year-old Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) represents the interests of professionals. The interests of such a body, among others, would be to harmonize local codes of ethics with global concerns and to ensure that global ethics are interpreted, applied, and enforced locally.

Government/ Regulatory Agencies

Crucial to the sustenance of democracy is the role of the media in government. Though measuring this role is subject to debate (Francke, 1995), there is hardly any doubt that many governments would be irresponsive to their citizens without the watchdog role journalists play. Likewise, government or their appointed agencies have a crucial role to play in the standardization of media ethics. The reasons for this role are multidimensional. First is the general belief that the media perform their role in the public interest, the custodian of which is the government. In addition to the necessary laws guiding the practice of journalism, the government, as in Nigeria, has helped put in place agencies that monitor the media on the basis of ethical codes of conduct. An example of such agencies is the Nigerian Press Organization, which operates in tandem with a government agency called the Nigerian Press Council. Second is the fact that government may want to get involved in order to restrict the media.

Third, in contrast to the optimistic perspective, the media can also be a factor in the breakdown of social order, thus undermining the ability to fulfill their roles as the watchdog, protector, and facilitator of peaceful democratic politics in Africa. Besides the deficiencies of the media as pointed out, government officials and even media practitioners are worried about the harmful influence of inaccurate and sensational media contents on uneducated, ignorant, naïve, or inexperienced listeners or readers who are easily persuaded by propaganda. The interests of the statutory media controllers have made imperative their inclusion in the ongoing global media ethics debate.

Media Nongovernmental Organizations

Nongovernmental organizations are very active on the African continent, especially in the area of media development, with a focus on press freedom advocacy, working conditions of journalists, training and workshops, and so on. Examples from among the many now active are Media Rights Agenda; and Youth, Media and Communication Initiative in Nigeria; Media Foundation for West Africa in Ghana; and Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) in Tanzania. Their interest in the formulation of the media global ethics system is, for instance, that it would ensure that the system does not trample on the rights of journalists.

Recommendations and Conclusion

If the task of producing a global ethical system is made the sole responsibility of media scholars and journalists, the global element in such a system will be missing because other crucial stakeholders would not be involved.

It is not advisable for journalists to formulate ethical principles behind the backs of the media owners who are their employers, nor will such principles be

valid without the input of media users, news consumers, and news makers who fund the journalism profession both in cash and kind. Besides that, most journalists are affiliated to professional bodies and practice their trade under a government that has the power to override any professional ethical code with its own laws when such codes conflict with its interests. The altruistic contributions from nongovernmental organizations will also prove useful in such debates. In order to ensure an all-inclusive participation, the following ways are recommended:

- First is the physical presence of capable representatives of all the identified stakeholders at roundtable discussions, conferences, workshops, and seminars where their interests are expressed and views noted.
- Second, the instrument of memoranda can be explored to collate and articulate their various perspectives. In this regard, the physical presence of the stakeholders might not be necessary.

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