

I welcome you to the second edition of Nigerian Entertainment Conference.

I have mixed feelings as I write. I feel good because what started out as a wish, an idea to bring the creative and entertainment industry in Nigeria together annually has become a reality. There was the pleasant surprise of the success of our debut last year, and the amazing support this year's event has received from far and near. Today should be indeed a happy day. But it's not. I feel pain because I know that there's so much work to be done. And we're not even scratching the surface.

Little has changed since we gathered inside the **Grand Ball Room** of Eko Hotels last April. What we call the entertainment industry in Nigeria is still a horrible mess: several camps and cliques instead of functional associations, quacks and pirates instead of distribution chains, hundreds of DIY artists with no label support or system, and thousands of movies with near-zero budgets. Our media space is dominated by gossip, red carpet and plagiarism, as art reporting declines, increasing record label deaths as telecoms giants and VAS agencies thrive, and a total collapse of law and order as far as contracts are concerned. I'm sure your list of ills is longer than mine. Feel free to add.

The situation is enough to make you cry, really. Personally, I have had to remind myself daily that I did not make a mistake when I decided to work, and invest in entertainment. I own a newspaper dedicated to reporting the industry. NET started with zero capital and became profitable within the first two years. Today, we deliver news in print, web and mobile, with a radio and TV service launching soon. It sounds sweet to say 'we became profitable' - but remember I didn't have a dime to invest. Also, we've kept costs quite low and enjoyed multiple revenue streams because of our model. But we face serious challenges that threaten our survival as a business. Getting our print edition across the country on time is a nightmare. Recouping our money and unsold papers from agents is near impossible. Getting payment from advertising agencies is more difficult than securing the adverts, which, as those working in the media will tell you, takes a herculean effort already.

I continue to consider shutting down the paper and focusing on our web and mobile platforms. But those too, have their own challenges in a peculiar system like Nigeria. We are the biggest target for content thieves, from radio to TV and web. It's so frustrating I'm tempted to name names. We've had to write many of them and are even considering legal action against some. On April 18, 2013, our old website (thenetng.com) was hijacked. A year after, our registrar Godaddy continues to frustrate efforts to reclaim our hacked domain. I can go on and on and on.

Why the rant? Because I want you to know that the shoe pinches here too. I've been asked many times why we're organising NEC with our own funds and no sponsorship in sight. Why don't we charge participants to attend? I've been queried when I tell people the conference is not 'another business.'

It's not because I think we are messiahs who can save a dying industry. Far from it. It's simply because I know that if we don't stop this collapse, then we will all perish with an industry that has shown, and continues to show immense promise. And when I say perish I don't mean there will no longer be entertainment. There will always be entertainment of some sort. There will always be the big music and movie stars. I guarantee you we will always have hits songs and soaps and superstars. What I cannot guarantee is who will be in control. If we don't erect the structures the industry needs to thrive and survive, then we risk a complete hijack by big businesses who know the importance of entertainment in marketing and sales. Look around you, from telcos to FMCG and banking, it's happening already. They're all here in this room - not because they're so crazy about entertainment or because they want autographs. It's because they understand the influence our industry has over the consumers their businesses need to survive. They have access to more data than you could imagine. And they're happy to put their money where their mouth is.

Each time an actor or musician rejoices over an 'ambassadorship' deal, I weep. Because if we had gotten it right, it would be the brands rejoicing. All over the world, celebrities endorse brands, but here, because we are impoverished individually and collectively, because we have no hopes of exploiting our products; no hopes of securing our future, we are at the mercy of big budget brands who dish out endorsement deals as a master does meals to slaves. I've been warned not to go there because many of the ambassadors, whose lives depend on these deals, would fight me if I went down that road. Sad.

Don't get me wrong. I do not blame the corporates. In fact, I think we should thank them for filling a gap - they've become the biggest source of revenue for the entire industry today. You'd do the same if you were in their shoes. Likewise, I don't blame the talent or their minders. I started my career managing musicians. I know a hungry artiste respects no contracts. He simply takes the next paycheck available as his life - and that of his dependents - may depend on it. That was my experience managing my late friend **Father U Turn** and my experience interacting with suffering legend **Majek Fashek**.

Forget what you read in the papers about Nollywood and the music industry. Forget the figures from Abuja. Forget the flashy cars and houses and bling bling. The industry is broke. Our artists are suffering. Many can barely pay school fees or house rent. For every **Pa Kasumu, OJB, Ngozi Nwosu** or **Gringory**, there are dozens more suffering in silence, with no resources to solve basic life issues. For every Wizkid and Don Jazzy and Genevieve there are thousands living from hand to mouth; many amazing talents who have become a burden to their families and friends.

Nigerians are hardworking and our entertainers are no exception. They continue to put in their best, from writers to cameramen, directors, musicians, poets, etc. But how can we monetize all these if we cannot get the product to consumers when and how they want it? How can we get the best from the system if the industry is not well structured and funded? If the brightest brains are leaving for oil & gas, telecoms, and even politics?

We need to build the industry of our dreams. We need to decide exactly how we want our future to be; and start working towards it now. I want to run a daily entertainment newspaper that will reach 10 million people on radio, TV, print and mobile. I want to run a newspaper that will show the world how our entertainers are doing wonders; a paper that will influence political campaigns and play a strong role in determining how our leaders get to power and how they behave while there. What's your dream for your career? For your organisation? We need to define these goals clearly and identify what needs to be done to achieve them.

No, we won't achieve that today or even tomorrow. But we need to start. To hell with cliques and camps and caucuses, to hell with sentiments and egos. We have an opportunity to build the greatest creative and entertainment industry in the world. Roll up your sleeves, and let's get to work!

Pardon, my manners - Happy deliberations. Hope to see you next year.

Being text of the speech delivered by the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of NET Newspaper, Ayeni Adekunle, at the second edition of the Nigerian Entertainment Conference which held on Wednesday April 23, in Lagos.