

Investigative Journalism and the Fight against Corruption

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ABSTRACT

Bribery and corruption seem to be a recurrent decimal in Nigeria. With the culture of impunity in place, there is massive outcry by Nigerians about selective fight against corruption. Besides government's insensitivity to the plight of the masses, which falls on deaf ears, the Nigerian people are often short-changed. Despite the "total" war on corruption by anti-graft institutions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and the Related Commission (ICPC) and the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), many alleged cases of corruption are still rampant/ The situation implies that the only hope for the common man in the fight against corruption in Nigeria is the media. Hence, it is pertinent to note that one of the most critical stakeholders in the fight against corruption is the mass media. The media are supposed to serve as the bridge between the government and the governed as well as the mouthpiece of society. In other words, one of the professional duties of the media in every society is to be a civic watchdog whose mission is to uncover secrets/issues and keep the government accountable to society. The media help to create and maintain a sense of nationhood and undertake developmental tasks through education and building political stability, help in the formation of public opinion and create forum for public discussions and, as well, serve as watchdogs on government to prevent all forms of abuses. Based on the foregoing, this paper posits that the media have a duty to ensure that all actions of government and government officials remain consistent with these objectives.

Keywords: Bribery and corruption, EFCC and CCB.

INTRODUCTION

The media (including social media) has an important role in the fight against corruption as it can demand accountability and transparency from the public and private sectors. There are several studies that have demonstrated the correlation between press freedom and corruption [1]. In many countries, the media confronts unethical people or practices and may often be the catalyst for a criminal or other investigation. The media provides information on public sector corruption where governmental activity is opaque by design or by default. The media, and in particular investigative journalism, plays a crucial role in exposing corruption to public scrutiny and fighting against impunity. Media reports on corruption have also taken centre stage at the global level. A case that demonstrates the importance of journalists and the media in detecting incidents of corruption is the Mossack Fonseca Papers case (widely known as the

Panama Papers case). In 2015, an anonymous source leaked documents from the Panama-based firm Mossack Fonseca to the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The newspaper investigated the documents with the help of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and published over 11.5 million documents containing information about secret trusts, financial transactions with tax havens, and more than 200,000 offshore entities (the online database Offshoreleaks, created by ICIJ, provides open access to all papers leaked from Mossack Fonseca). The release of these documents has led to lawsuits in numerous countries around the world. Over USD 1.2 billion have been recovered in countries including Iceland, Uruguay, Mexico, New Zealand, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Corruption

Corruption has received an extensive attention in the communities, and perhaps, due to the fact that it has been over-flogged in the academic circles, corruption has received varied definitions. Corruption has broadly been defined as a perversion or a change from good to bad. Specifically, corruption or "corrupt" behavior "involves the violation of established rules for personal gain and profit" [2]. Corruption is "efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means - private gain at public expense; or a misuse of public power for private benefit [3]. In addition, corruption is a behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role, because of private [gains] - regarding (personal, close family, private clique, pecuniary or status gains. It is a behavior which violates rules against the exercise of certain types of [duties] for private [gains] - regarding influence [4]. This definition includes such behavior as bribery (use of a reward to pervert the

Theoretical Framework

The social responsibility theory is considered apt for this paper. The social responsibility theory, according to [6], was propounded by Siebert, Peterson & Schramm in the mid-19th century. The theory rests on the notion that media outfits and journalists should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society. According to [7], the social responsibility theory has seven basic assumptions; these include: the media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society; through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met; the media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established constitution to be able to carry out its responsibilities; that whatever might lead to crime, violence, civil disorder or offence to minority groups should be avoided by the media; that the media should reflect society's plurality, give access to diverse views and grant everyone the right to reply. Based on the above tenets of the social responsibility theory, the society has the right to expect high standards of

judgment of a person in a position of trust); nepotism (bestowal of patronage by reason of ascriptive relationship rather than merit); and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private uses. To the already crowded landscape [5], adds that corruption is an "antisocial behaviour conferring improper benefits contrary to legal and moral norms, and which undermine the authorities" to improve the living conditions of the people. Even though some of these definitions of corruption have been around for over decades, the recent development in Nigeria where discoveries of stolen public funds run into billions of US Dollars and Nigeria Naira, make these definitions very adequate and appropriate. Corruption is probably the main means to accumulate quick wealth in Nigeria. Corruption occurs in many forms, and it has contributed immensely to the poverty and misery of a large segment of the Nigerian population.

performance from the media. Such expectation includes investigating societal ills and unravelling corrupt cases hitherto unknown to the public and yet are of utmost significance. Suffice it to say that the above expectations can only come to fruition through investigative journalism.

Conceptualising Investigative Journalism

Though there are various definitions of investigative reporting, yet there is a broad agreement on its major components: systematic, in-depth and original research and reporting, often involving the unearthing of secrets [8]. In his view, [9] sees investigative journalism as a non-profit, evidence-based, aggressive and adversarial journalistic practice. It is a special reporting that is more thorough than conventional news reporting; it uncovers information, not before gathered, in order to inform the public of events that might affect their lives. Burgh [10] describes it as a "distinct genre of journalism and a vital means of accountability. "Story-Based Inquiry, an investigative journalism handbook

published by UNESCO defines Investigative journalism thus: "investigative journalism involves exposing to the public, matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding. It requires using both secret and open sources and documents." The KAS Media Programme [11] defines investigative journalism as "a form of journalism in which reporters go in-depth to investigate a single story that may uncover corruption, review government policies or of corporate houses or draw attention to social, economic, political or cultural trends." This kind of reporting may warrant an investigative journalist, or team of journalists, to spend months or years researching a single topic. This implies that investigative journalism is a kind of journalism practice that requires expertise. Unlike conventional reporting, where reporters rely on materials supplied by the government, NGOs and other agencies, investigative reporting depends on materials gathered through the reporter's own initiative. The practice aims at exposing public matters that are otherwise concealed, either deliberately or accidentally [11]. For over a century, investigative reporting has had a significant impact against corruption, human rights abuses and corporate exploitation [12].

The Role of Investigative Journalism in the Fight against Corruption

There is no evidence that Nigeria's enduring struggle with corruption and its global image about it has lessened in the last decade [13]. In fact, the anti-corruption rhetoric of the current administration and other previous administrations has not translated into substantial anti-corruption policymaking, programmes or projects. Justine and Egere [14] establish that in Africa, especially Nigeria, exposing of those who loot public funds is tantamount to warfare. This has led to lack of sanity in public service on one hand, and underdevelopment on the other. Justine

& Egere argue that often times, the culture of impunity are the order of the day. This is because state crimes go uninvestigated and unreported. What is partly responsible for this ugly phenomenon is the fact that the potentials of the media as a driver of social and economic development have not been fully harnessed [14]. Commenting on the lackadaisical approach to the fight against corruption in Nigeria [14] say: Bribery and corruption seem to be a recurrent decimal in Nigeria. With the culture of impunity in place, there is massive outcry by Nigerians about selective fight against corruption. Besides government's insensitivity to the plight of the masses, which falls on deaf ears, the Nigerian people are often short-changed. Despite the "total" war on corruption by anti-graft institutions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and the Related Commission (ICPC) and the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), many alleged cases of corruption are still in the cooler (p.95).

The above pathetic situation implies that the only hope for the common man in the fight against corruption in Nigeria is the media. Hence, it is pertinent to note that one of the most critical stakeholders in the fight against corruption is the mass media. The media are supposed to serve as the bridge between the government and the governed as well as the mouthpiece of society. In other words, one of the professional duties of the media in every society is to be a civic watchdog whose mission is to uncover secrets/issues and keep the government accountable to society. Kwase & Shem [15] maintain that the mass media play an invaluable role in society through investigating societal ills and unravelling facts hitherto hidden from the people and which would help in bringing about both rural and national development, and this can only be achieved via a journalism practice called investigative journalism. Gambo [16], cited in [17] asserts that the media have a duty to ensure that all actions of government and government officials

remain consistent with these objectives. The media help to create and maintain a sense of nationhood and undertake developmental tasks through education and building political stability, help in the formation of public opinion and create forum for public discussions and, as well, serve as watchdogs on government to prevent all forms of abuses.

Schiffrin [18], cited in [19] corroborates that for more than a century, investigative reporting has had a significant impact against corruption, human rights abuses and corporate exploitation. In Nigeria, the most spectacular manifestations of the potentials of the media in curbing corruption has been the forced resignations of Mallam Salihu Buhari, Evans Enwerem, Chuba Okadigbo, Adolphus Wabara, and Patricia Ette, Adenike Grange and others on scandals of forgeries, falsifications and contract scams [17]. Commenting on the role played by the media in the fight against corruption in recent years, [20] affirms that the media have so far played a remarkable role, though this paper contends that there is the need for more efforts. In his words [20] captures it thus:

In the recent past, the media have also done well in few cases. The media followed up the forgery and perjury cases against former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Salihu Buhari and investigated the questionable past of the old senate president, Evan Enwerem. Other cases have been brought against former senate president, Chuba Okadigbo (for financial recklessness) and against former national vice-chairman of the Peoples' Democratic Party, Bode George (for contract splitting). These personalities were either convicted or removed from offices as a result of the relentless interest and follow-up generated by the stories and pressure mounted by the media on the executive and the judiciary to bring them to justice. In light of the above, there is the need for the Nigerian media, especially investigative journalists, to admit the fact that the fight against corruption is their social responsibility, hence the

need for all journalists to swing into action as they are the only hope of the common Nigerians.

Challenges of Investigative Journalism in the Fight against Corruption

Despite the auspicious potency of investigative journalism, especially in a country like Nigeria, where corrupt practices are at alarming rate, [21,22,23,24] observes that it is obvious that lately, newspapers, television and radio stations tend to have the same headlines; no difference in terms of breaking news made on the basis of thorough investigation into issues of high national significance. No serious attempt to uncover practice or produce new data never before discovered. Ugwu [22], cited in [21] observes that investigative journalism in a developing nation like Nigeria is threatened by numerous challenges which are almost crippling its proper practice. In fact, the above assertion makes many observers to doubt if at all investigative journalism is effectively practised in Nigeria. Aretha & Ben [23] outline the following as limitations of investigative journalism in Nigeria:

i. Media Ownership:

Aretha & Ben [23] argue that the owners of media houses have influence not just through direct intervention or by establishing lines that cannot be crossed; they set the tone and decide which markets to target. They control editorial budgets and hire and fire their editors who are their representatives in the media world. Thus, the editor's powers can be constrained when the owners insist and impose policies on the media house. This can limit who, what and how a journalist investigates and reports an incident.

ii. Political Interference:

Government officials have hung on this anticlimax statement to oppress journalists and scare them away from satisfactory performance of their responsibility [24,25,26,27,28]. One of such recent cases is the arrest of Omoyele Soware in 2019 and similarly when Gbenga Aruleba of the African Independent Television (AIT) was arrested and detained several days by the

civilian regime of Olusegun Obasanjo for allegedly inciting the public against the government, an allegation that could not be substantiated. Sometimes, the government of the day feel the need to close down media houses that employ probing investigative journalists. In extreme situations, the license of the media house may be withdrawn by the government of the day, thus leaving several journalists jobless [23].

iii. Limited Access to Information

The Nigerian investigative journalist has limited access to official archives and records. Sometimes, official archives are incomplete, poorly maintained and

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

The extent to which journalists can assist in detecting corruption depends on whether the media is free and independent. For media reporting and journalism to play an effective role in corruption detection, the media has to be free and independent. Freedom of information (FOI) laws are important in determining the role of the media in detecting corruption. Further, there must be legislative frameworks in place to protect journalists and their sources from unfounded lawsuits, recrimination and victimization. Secondly, there is the need for professional bodies and media owners to ensure regular training on investigative journalism so as to equip journalists with necessary skills and techniques to carryout investigation. Journalists should

subjected to tough official secrets or privacy laws, which are often left over from the colonial era. The Nigerian investigative journalists, as with many of their counterparts in Africa have to be far more creative and flexible to find alternative routes to the evidence they need [25,26,27,28,29].

iv. Dearth of Qualified Journalists:

A good number of the people that are into investigative journalism in Nigeria are not qualified to practice this noble profession. Hence, they can easily bargain vital information for just a few thousands of naira.

strive to work in syndicate while carrying out investigative. They should also access forensic knowledge and artificial intelligence to cope with current trends. There is the need for a synergy between the Nigerian investigative journalists and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and other government agencies for information. Yet this paper recommends that such synergy should not encourage investigative journalists to ever fraternise with these agencies as evidences abound that they too can be highly, absolutely corrupt, to the extent of setting up a journalist or colluding with criminals to carry out dastardly acts against innocent citizens.

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