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The Media, Corruption and Democratic Accountability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract

Transparency and accountability are essential pillars of democratic government the world over. These virtues are significant in measuring the success or otherwise of any democratic system. Apart from the activities of anti-graft agencies in combating corruption in the society, the mass media are often looked upon as important institution in the fight against corruption in any democratic system. This is because of their watchdog function of monitoring the actions and inactions of those in power. Thus, this article examines the activities of Nigerian media in the fight against corruption and the promotion of accountability in leadership of the country. The paper discovers that the Nigerian media have recorded a huge success in bringing public officers to account by exposing corrupt practices among government

functionaries. The article further reveals that the mass media are constrained by factors such as; corruption, legal laws, lack of access to information, inadequate funds, media ownership, and lack of freedom of expression. The paper concludes by recommending measures to address the identified challenges.

Key Words: Mass Media, Corruption, Democratic Accountability and Nigeria

Introduction

One factor that has consistently posed a threat to the sustenance of Nigerian democracy is the issue of corruption. According to Egwemi (2012), the challenge of corruption remains one of the most debilitating issues facing Nigeria. It has been one of the impediments to the country's development efforts. In fact, it has been one singular reason why Nigeria is experiencing backwardness in terms of political, economic and social development.

Ever since Nigeria came in contact with democratic ethos, beginning from the Tafawa Balewa/Azikiwe regime, the increasing pressure for democratic accountability and transparency in governance has become a watershed and perceptibly understood as basis for curbing corrupt practices and other forms of unethical behaviours (Jonathan, 2009). This is because the country has been subjected to a prolonged period of military dictatorship where the rule of law and constitutional provisions are not respected. This therefore reinforces and breeds corruption and unethical practices with impunity. After several years of military rule in Nigeria, the country returned to democratic rule on May 29th 1999. The new civilian government of President Olusegun Obasanjo identified 12 key sectors of the economy for government's urgent attention. One of the problems that were to be addressed was the issue of massive corruption in government and private sectors of the economy.

The administration's determination to fight the monster of corruption led to the formation of anti-corruption agencies. These agencies

include the Independent Corrupt and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence Initiative (BMPII), Extraction Industries Transparency Initiative (NEII), and Code of Conduct Bureau among several others. Apart from these efforts by the new democratic government to stem the tide of corruption in the country, the mass media on their part are expected to play a significant role in making public officers and the politicians accountable to the Nigerian people. Section 22 of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria confers this responsibility on the media thus:

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives (contained in this chapter) and highlight the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people. In this wise, the expectation of the media with regards to their contribution to the promotion of accountability lies in their ability to put the government of the day under close monitoring. This is made manifest in the media's watchdog role in examining the conduct of public servants, especially the politicians which is a task that is germane to democracy (Oladokun, 2010).

It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to examine the role of the Nigerian media in making government and public officials accountable to the people. The paper also assesses the contributions of the mass media in fighting corruption in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Agenda Setting Theory. The Agenda Setting Theory was postulated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in (1972/1973) who first carried out a study into the agenda setting hypothesis of the media. They aver that in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only

about a given issue, but also how much amount of information in news story and its position. Folarin (1998) notes that the agenda setting theory represents the power of the media to pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at any given period of time; the media also ascribe power to the people to determine their thoughts over issues of public concern. Gunter (2000) equally asserts that the theory is important in measuring the influences of the press on the public by the press. This therefore, enables the press to collect issues or events that at any point in time are ranked in the hierarchy of importance. It is actually the process through which the press communicates the relative importance of various issues and events.

The importance of this theory to this study lies on the fact that the media posses the power to decide what the public see and perceive as important. Therefore the media should be able to use this power to influence public opinion on the issue of corruption and accountability in Nigerian democracy. In addition, through constant reportage about issues of corruption, the mass media will draw public attention which in turn would make public officials brace up to their responsibilities by making them accountable to the masses.

Conceptualizing Corruption

Corruption is a universal phenomenon. There is no nation in the world that is free from the problem of corruption. However, the only difference is that the prevalence, gravity and persistence of the menace vary from one county to the other. Emanor: (2007) asserts that corruption is a national tragedy and seemingly in tractable global phenomenon pointing out that it only differs in degrees and dimensions among nations, but the impact remains undesirable, devastating, and regrettable. It is very difficult to define corruption because of diverse manifestation and understanding of the concept. There is no generally acceptable definition of corruption. This is owing to the fact that scholars have varied explanations about the concept. The World Bank (1995) views corruption as:

The abuse of public office for private gains, public office is abused for private gains when an official accepts, solicits or extorts a bribe. It is also abused when private agents actively offer bribes to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantage and profit. Public office can also be abused for personal benefit even if no bribery occurs through patronage and nepotism, the theft of state, asset and the diversion of state revenue.

This conception sees breaches in the official procedure of doing things in public affairs especially among office holders as corruption. Corruption can occur in private organizations as well. When people demand money or any form of gratification before or after an official assignment is carried out is usually viewed as corruption. This definition rightly fits into Nigeria situation today. Private interest and personal gain is placed over and above national interests. This is why Kombol (2009) avers that through history, human beings have been selfish at one point or the other rather than pursue the good of all; they dwell on personal interest and that is why corruption persists in developing countries with impunity.

To Gboyega (1996), corruption involves the giving or taking of bribe or illegal acquisition of wealth using the resources of public office, including the exercise of discretion. According to this definition, corruption has to do with the acquisition of illegal resources which belongs to the public in most cases and is diverted for personal, family, and community gains. In Nigeria, public officials have been indicated for diverting huge amount of money and resources meant for public use into private pockets because of greed and selfish interest. In the same vein, Akindele (1995) opined that corruption is any form of reciprocal behaviour or transaction where both the power/office holder can respectively initiate the inducement of each other by some rewards to grant (illegal) preferential treatment or favour against the principles and interests of specific organizations (or public) within the society. Corruption thus has no single acceptable definition and it is

not a unique feature of any individual or country. It is indeed a global phenomenon. In summary, corruption is the abuse of public office for private gain of the public office holder and his associates.

Accountability as a Concept

According to Oyadiran (2009), the concept of accountability stems from the Latin word 'computare' (to account), which in turn derives from 'putare' (to reckon), which is an extension of the terminology used in the money lending systems that first developed in ancient Greece and later, Rome. He further notes that an individual would borrow money from a money lender, this could be a local temple or merchant, and would then be held responsible to give an account to that party. In recent times, governments, international organizations, private organizations and non-governmental organizations are increasingly extolling the concept of accountability. This is germane because humans are always prone to negative behaviour.

Democratic accountability develops from the concept of good governance which entails the use of political power to positively manage a nation's affairs. Democratic politics is always globally ingrained with certain minimum principles. These rules include: participation and inclusiveness, responsiveness and accountability, transparency and good governance, regular free and fair elections, freedom and respect for human rights, and the observance of the rule of law (Edgar, 2009). Accountability has been defined in several ways by scholars. For instance, Egwu (2003) argues that accountability simply means that public officials at all levels must take responsibility for their actions and cannot act as laws unto themselves. Public officials must render account of their stewardship either to the general public or to the constituency they seek to represent. He further posits that closely related to accountability is transparency. Transparency calls for openness in the conduct of public affairs. Oyadiran (2009) writes that transparency and accountability are introduced as a means of holding public officials accountable and shunning corruption. When government officials and politicians are open to the press and

the public, there would be less opportunity to abuse public office for their personal interest.

On his part, Olusola (2009) defines accountability as 'the existence of checks on leadership to ensure responsible behaviour that will conform to the wishes of the governed.' Similarly, Feintuck (1999:120) cited by McQuail (2005) offers a legal meaning to accountability. He said accountability is 'a requirement to give an account of one's actions, either directly to the public, or via public authorities.' The concept also means being liable to sanction if found in breach of some requirements or expectations attaching to the exercise of power.

Accountability is the hallmark of a democratic government. It is an important ingredient or requirement of good governance. Where accountability is not enforced, public officials and politicians will perpetrate all kinds of corruption with impunity. Accountability is a process or the avenue by which governments in particular can be made limited entities; they cannot act or rule in absolute or arbitrary terms nor do they have unlimited power except in a dictatorship or totalitarian regime. A government that is accountable is a government that rules constitutionally, observes procedures, and is subject or is prepared to be subject to some checks and balances (Amuso, 2006). An accountable government is one that is, all things being equal, free from corrupt practices, is likely to do battle with the menace of corruption in its entire ramification. Therefore, every public officer ought to know that he should give account of his tenure - the financial transactions, the court rulings, the economic policies the projects erected, and every action taken at one time or the other (Edger, 2009).

The Media and Accountability in Nigeria Democratic System: An Overview

It is truism that the media in Nigeria have been vigorously strong in entrenching democratic ethos since its inception during the pre-colonial days. It is widely acknowledged that the fourth republic was heralded by the Nigerian media. In discharging its constitutional

duties as clearly spelt out in section 22 of the 1999 constitution, the media has held so many public officers accountable and help to unravel cases of corruption in the country.

In performing their watchdog function, the media of communication have orchestrated the first investigations into corruption in public life in Nigeria when in the 1950s the first panel of inquiry was set up to look into the affairs of the African Continental Bank (ACB). Agber (2011) reported that there were allegations that Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe had abused his office by allowing public funds to be invested in the bank in which he had substantial interests. This precipitated the institution of the justice Strafford Forster-Sutton Commission of inquiry of July 24, 1956 to investigate the allegation. The panel report indicted Azikiwe, thereby causing him to transfer all his rights and interests in the bank to the Eastern Nigerian Government.

In the post-independence period, the media did not relent in its efforts to fight against corruption in the country. In 1962, a corruption charge was levelled against Chief Obafemi Awolowo by the media. This subsequently led to the investigation of the relationship between Awolowo and the National Investment and Property Company, a private enterprise that was allegedly indebted to the Western Regional Government to the tune of 7,200.001. The federal government investigated the matter. At the end of the investigation, Chief Awolowo was indicted by the commission and consequently, all the property owned by the National Investigation and Property Company were acquired by the Western Regional Government (Sowunmi et al, 2010:8 cited in Agber, 2011).

At the onset of the fourth republic in May 1999, the media in their quest to defend and protect the hard earned democracy, swung into action by uncovering corrupt practices committed by top government functionaries. One remarkable example with respect to the media role in holding political office holders into account is the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Alhaji Salisu Buhari. *The News* magazine in its 10th July 1999 edition, titled "Face of a Liar" reported

the certificate and age falsification of the former speaker. In the best tradition of investigative journalism, *The News* magazine thoroughly investigated Buhari's claims about his age, which was lower than what the constitution stipulated for the office he then held; as well as debunked the claims to have attended the University of Toronto (Ayo and Dele, 2001). As a result of this discovery, the media consistently brought the issue to the front burner and drew public attention which led to his removal from the seat of the speaker of the House of Representatives.

Furthermore, the media has recorded huge success in the fight against corruption in the fourth republic; in performing their constitutional role of monitoring the government; the media indicted the former senate president, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo over allegation of corruption and misappropriation of funds. Dr. Chuba Okadigbo assumed leadership responsibility as senate president on November 18, 1999, following the resignation of his predecessor, Chief Evans Enwerem, in circumstances similar to that of Alhaji Salisu Buhari. The media beamed its searchlight on the investigation of the matter by monitoring closely the Idris Kuta Panel set up to investigate into the matter. After thorough investigation, the panel indicted the senate president for spending an unauthorized 30 million Naira to purchase cars and another 37 million to furnish his official residence, among other gross misconducts. Even though he was indicted, Okadigbo refused to honourably resign. It took the intervention of the media that mounted pressure on him to vacate his seat. Several newspapers and broadcast stations condemned Okadigbo in strong terms, calling on him to honourably resign. For example, an editor with *ThisDay* newspaper, Segun Adeniyi, wrote in a representative article entitled "Just go" (*ThisDay*, 3 August, 2000) lamented that Okadigbo allowed himself the indulgence of situating his power and responsibility within the number of contracts he could award to himself and his cronies. It was even more tragic that the man would lie so blatantly to the probe panel against the allegations levelled against him. Due to media pressure, Okadigbo was impeached by 81 to 11 votes on August 8,

2000. Again, the media recorded a major milestone in holding public figures to accountability, which in turn promotes democratic accountability and transparency.

Corruption among Nigerian political office holders has received great attention by the Nigerian media. The spotlight of the press has consistently monitored activities in the National Assembly. On September 2007, the speaker of the house of representative, Mrs Patricia Etteh was alleged to have awarded a contract for the renovation of her official residence and that of her deputy, Babangida Nguroje, amounting to the tune of #628 million. The news media closely monitored the investigation of the issue, thereby bringing to the notice of the public every detail of the investigation. The findings of the committee indicted Mrs Patricia Etteh and her deputy. The findings of the committee revealed that due process was not adhered to in the awards of the contracts. Even though Etteh refused to accept the verdict of the committee, pressure from the mass media and some members of the house forced her to step aside from her position as the speaker of the house of representative. This endorsed Stapendurst (1999) position that the media plays an important role in ensuring good governance and curbing corruption by investigating and reporting cases of corruption ethically and professionally.

The media also indicted several ministers of corruption charges. Prominent among them is the allegation levelled against the former minister of education, Professor Fabian Osuji, who offered #55 million to the former senate president Chief Adolphus Wabara and some members of the Education Committee in both houses of the National Assembly to facilitate the passage of the budget proposal of his ministry in the 2005 appropriation bill. Quoting *Newswatch* magazine of April 4, 2005, Iwokwagh and Ijwo (2011) asserted that the senate president told the minister of education to come forward with necessary PR or risk cut in his budget. The minister was given 5 days up till December 3, 2004 to produce #55 million gratifications or forget the budget. The minister eventually compromised and gave the #55 million naira. The media paid close attention to the investigation

process to its logical conclusion. This development led to the removal of the minister from office.

Apart from holding the National Assembly into account, the media also monitored the activities of some governors in the country. Prominent among these cases were that of Joshua Chibi Dariye, the former governor of Plateau State and that of Bayelsa State governor, Diepreye Alamiyeseigha. Both of them were charged with the allegation of money laundry. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in collaboration with the United Kingdom government recovered huge amount of money stolen by these governors and kept in the UK. Ughegbe (2007) writes that in September 2007, the British Government returned ₦29.3 million to the Nigerian government. This is part of the monies that were recovered by the London metropolitan police. Recently, President Goodluck Jonathan decided to give Mr. Diepreye Alamiyeseigha, presidential pardon. This sparked up different reactions from the members of the public. Many did not seem to agree with the president for doing that. Many are of the opinion that by granting presidential pardon to the former governor, the president would encourage public office holders to continue to be corrupt. It is evidently clear that the Nigerian media were not mute in holding government accountable. In summary, the media through their watchdog role have succeeded in promoting good governance, accountability, and sanity to the polity.

However, it is worthy of mention that the media industry is not also immune to corruption. This is because they are part of the social system. It has been observed that corruption has compromised the capacity of the media to effectively champion social engineering in Nigeria. For example, Jibo (2003:23) cited in Iwokwagh and Ijwo (2011) noted that electoral officials and politicians cut deals to subvert the electoral process without fear of being exposed by a journalist determined to unearth it to make a name. Ray Ekpu, chief executive officer, *Newswatch Communications* articulated this point when he said that instead of journalists to practice competitive, professional and ethical journalism, many practitioners have resorted to the

dubious practice of pack journalism that is governed by cheque book arrangement (*Newswatch*, September 16, 2002 cited in Iwokwagh and Ijwo, 2011).

Many media practitioners fraternize with the politicians in order to gain one favour or the other. The issue of brown envelope syndrome still persists among many journalists. This attitude made most journalists to compromise the ethics of the profession. Several journalists collect bribes to kill news stories or distort the content of their report to favour the powers that be. This development has weakened the media as effective means of fighting corruption in Nigeria.

Media Responsibility and Promotion of Accountability

The media are complex non-state actors in the society whose activities have been made even more complex by rapid advances in communication technology. The media have a very crucial role to play in the promotion of accountability in any democratic society. In any democracy, the media act as the eyes, ears and voices of the public, drawing attention to abuses of power and human rights violation (Asemah, 2011). They monitor trends and issues as they unfold in the society, thereby reporting to the populace. They monitor the activities of the government at all levels and also monitor the activities of individuals. They also provide checks and balances by ensuring that individuals and public officials do not overstep their bounds in the exercise of power. No wonder they are often called the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

The media in any democracy provide citizens with adequate information about government activities. This is very crucial because individuals cannot take informed decisions about government policies and programmes if they are not properly informed. The provision of information will cause the public to be enlightened on the activities of government. Since corruption thrives in secrecy, the media is in a better position to expose this monster and other social vices perpetrated by public officers. Without information, there is no

accountability. Information is power and the more people possess it, the more power is distributed. The degree to which a media is independent is the degree to which it can perform an effective public watchdog function over the conduct of public affairs (Pope, 2000: 119 cited by Ayo and Dele, 2001).

The mass media enables the citizens of any given country to monitor the actions and inactions of public figures. This, according to Besley, Burges and Pat in World Bank development studies (2002:45), can lead to government that is more accountable and responsive to its citizens' needs. In a democracy, the media play significant roles because the citizens rely on the mass media to get information on a day to day basis. This in turn gives the public the ability to participate in the process of governance. For example, when people of a local government are informed about what the local government chairman receives as subvention from the federal government, yet they do not see any visible impact in their locality, they can confront their chairman to explain how he spends the tax payer's money. This will in turn lead to accountability.

Nigerian media owe society the responsibility of bringing to account the actions and inactions of government officials. The media can do this through variety of programmes; for instance, the Federal Radio Cooperation of Nigeria (FRCN) and the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) have been doing that since the inception of democracy in 1999. Political programmes such as "Inside the Senate", "Know Your Rights", "Democracy Today", and "Political Platform" are programmes designed to make public officers accountable to the Nigerian people. Through these programmes, majority of Nigerians are able to know which minister or governor is performing well. More recently, a media accountability tour was organized by the Nigeria media to all the 36 states of the federation including the Federal Capital, Abuja. The essence of the tour was to monitor the activities of the governors in their respective states. This is a way of holding them accountable to the Nigerians. The people deserve to know and see what the government is doing to uplift the life of the common man.

Through the accountability media tour, some of the governors were exposed because of their inability to provide dividends of democracy to their people.

One important feature of a democratic government is transparency and openness in the conduct of government activities. When government activities are shrouded in secrecy, corruption is bound to thrive. The media can, therefore, enhance transparency and openness in government activities. As information agents, the media have the ability to expose corruption in government circles. Countless examples abound where the media exposed hidden corrupt practices among Nigeria public office holders, hence, the promotion of accountability and transparency in the country.

The media set agenda for public discussion. Through the agenda setting function, the mass media are able to guide the public on issues they should think of or regard as important, by frequently reporting such issues (Bittner, 1989). Since the return of democracy in May 1999, the Nigeria media have raised the issue of corruption to the plane of public discussion. They have reported corruption cases involving high profile civil servants and politicians in the country. Jingles, adverts and programmes about the damaging effect of corruption are frequently seen and heard from local and national television and radio stations across the country. The public are now educated and enlightened about the menace of corruption. All these successes were achieved because the Nigeria media have zero tolerance to the issue of corruption. This is because corruption has caused underdevelopment, poverty and economic backwardness to the nation. This is evident in the scores of public officers that have been indicted on corruption charges. The Nigeria media have performed credibly well over the years in bringing public officials to account. They have brought hidden cases of corruption to the notice of the public; they have informed, educated and enlightened the public on the dangers of corruption to the nation. These, to some extent, have promoted good governance and transparency in Nigerian democracy.

Constraints of the Mass Media in the Fight against Corruption in Nigeria

Despite the fact that Nigeria media have recorded some successes in the fight against corruption in the country, their efforts have been crippled by several limitations. These limitations include the following:

- (a) Lack of total freedom of expression.

For the media to effectively carry their function as regards investigating corruption and making public officers accountable to the society, they need to be free to discharge their duties effectively. Even though the Nigerian constitution guarantees this freedom, in practical terms it is not exercised. Several times, government and security agents have arrested journalists and in most cases even closed down media houses due to unfavourable reports presented by the media.

- (b) Lack of access to information.

Access to information is important for transparency and public accountability. The ability of the media to make public officials accountable to the people lies in the ability of the media to have unhindered access to public information. When the media does not have access to information, they will not be able to bring corruption charges against politicians. There are so many official documents that the media is not allowed to see by the government due to their sensitive nature. Lack of access to these documents hampers the media from engaging in investigative journalism.

- (c) Presence of laws that negate the media from carrying out its functions.

Several laws exist to curtail the mass media from digging out facts concerning public officers. Some of these laws are official secrets act, the law of sedition, defamation act, shield law, and a host of others. These laws protect public officers from being prosecuted or investigated while in office. Thus, they enjoy some immunity while in

office and prosecuting them is very difficult. These laws are negatively affecting anti-corruption agencies and media men from carrying out investigation on such public figures.

(d) Ownership factor.

The media is constrained in its fight against corruption when majority of media houses are dominated and controlled by the government. This is the case with Nigeria. Most of the broadcast outfits in the country are owed by the government, a situation that makes it very difficult for them to criticize the government. Few of the private stations are also incapacitated in this regard because government patronized them for revenue generation. The only option left is the print media which source their revenue from the daily sales of newspapers.

(e) Poor funding of media houses.

Poor funding of government and private owned media houses by the government have encouraged corruption among media workers. In most cases, journalists work without important working tools coupled with the fact that their remuneration is very poor. They are often tempted to collect gratifications from politicians in order to survive. This in turn leads to unethical practices among journalists.

Summary

The mass media are important instrument for achieving accountability in any democratic system. They are potential tools in the fight against corruption in any system. They have helped to deepen democracy and promote good governance and transparency in Nigeria since the inception of the fourth republic in 1999. The media does this through their constitutional roles of information dissemination, education, and surveillance of the environment.

Recommendations

The study proffers the following recommendations:

The mass media should continue to expose corruption and promote the virtue of accountability among public officials, civil servants and citizens alike.

While the media have done credibly well in the fight against corruption, they should also do same among themselves. In this regard, the Nigeria Union of Journalists should ensure that journalists who get involved in corrupt practices are punished to serve as example to others.

The media should not be selective in their reportage with regards to corruption cases. They should strive to maintain objectivity and verify facts before they publish any report.

The media need to work in collaboration with anti-corruption agencies and none-governmental organizations if they will effectively fight the war against corruption. These agencies will feed the media with vital information in the cause of their investigation.

Since corruption cases require thorough investigation by the mass media, all laws that inhibit the media from getting vital information should be expunged from the constitution. This will help ease the work of the media to a great extent in uncovering hidden corruption cases in the country.

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