Investigative Journalism as an Instrument of Fighting Public Corruption in Nigeria

Musa Alhassan
Department of Mass Communication, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

And

A. K. Dalha
Department of Political Science and International Relations, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Abstract

Media scholars have identified investigative journalism as a veritable means of fighting public corruption through raising public awareness, and detecting and reporting corrupt public office holders for onward prosecution. By exposing corruption, investigative journalists help in activating anti-corruption values and whipping up public pressure against corruption. The very consciousness that there exists a vibrant press that is ever watching could be a deterrent to corruption-inclined officials and individuals. The study adopted secondary data method. The objective of this paper is to bring to the fore the role played by investigative journalism in fighting corruption. This paper adopts Klitgaard's 1988 model on public corruption, mathematically illustrated as C = M + D - A where Corruption equals Monopoly plus Discretion minus Accountability to show that the more the investigative journalism, the more the accountability, and the less the public corruption. Findings show that free, aggressive, bold investigative journalism constitutes a significant deterrent to public corruption and enables citizens to hold public officeholders accountable, which is critical to advancement and preservation of democratic institutions. The study concludes that the most important role of investigative journalists is regular and independent monitoring of those in power, and supplying trustworthy information about their activities in order to promote accountability for the overall development of Nigeria. It recommends that government should support investigative journalists in their efforts towards exposing corrupt practices that have negative effects on our national development.

Keywords: Investigative Journalism, Public Corruption, Watchdog, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

There is a general agreement among researchers and practitioners alike that the media has a pivotal role to play in strengthening processes of democratization, quality of government, economic development and anti-corruption (Norris, 2008; Besley & Prat, 2006; Weder & Brunetti, 2003; Färdigh, 2013). The media can inform and educate people about the detrimental effects of corruption and, through exposure, increase the political risk of those involved in corrupt practices.

Through their reportage of happenings in the country, media serve as the bridge between the governed and government. As 'watchdog' of the society, journalists are charged with regular and independent inspection of those in power and publishing trustworthy information about government's activities to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to people as enshrined in Section 22 of the 1999 constitution.

Ekeanyanwu (2000) describes the media as the 'fourth estate of the realm' and also the 'watchdog of the society' responsible for news sourcing, dissemination of news, educational promotion, surveillance, social enlightenment and mobilization. These functions collectively turn media into an important link/factor in the relationship between the government and the governed and make them essential to societal growth and development. This responsibility is predicated on the thinking that for government to be seen as transparent and above board its activities must be made known to the people it governs and it must yield itself to scrutiny.

Ingram and Henshall (2008) assert that the watchdog function is better carried out through investigative journalism which involves finding, reporting and presenting news which other people may try to hide. This type of journalism is difficult because people at the centre of the story will usually not help and may even try to stop journalists from doing their job. Hunter and Hanson (2011) describe investigative journalism as the process of exposing to the public matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally behind loads of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding. Alli (2012) describes investigative journalism as a national service which can be used to fight corruption with a view to correcting ills of the society for national development.

This study focuses attention on public corruption because it pertains to corruption affecting public institutions and public personalities like civil servants and public office holders who are involved in corruption in a government agency e.g. governor of a state or a chairman of a local government involved in corruption within his state or local government. Since the state or local governments are public institutions, that individual in his capacity as a chairman is a public personality. Public corruption therefore suggests that you are dealing with corruption in the agencies of government which affects the public (Alzubayr, 2011).

Scholars have traced the root of underdevelopment worldwide to corruption. Ribadu (2006) argues that corruption is responsible for perpetual collapse of

Nigerian infrastructure and institutions; it is the cause of the endemic poverty in Africa; it is behind the under-development and cyclical failure of democracy to take root in Africa. Corruption is worse than terrorism.

Stressing the devastating effect of corruption, Stople (2008) opines that the cost of corruption exceeds by far the damage caused by any other single crime; corruption worsens the investment climate and undermines competitiveness of national economies.

Experts have described corruption as the greatest obstacles to nations' development, For example, Dandago (2008) states that corruption in Nigeria, just as in most other African countries, has currently become the greatest challenge to leaders and citizens, threatening to undermine effective governmental financial management. It is also a threat to both economic development and the process of establishing an enduring democracy in developing countries like Nigeria.
This conceptual paper explores the role being played by investigative journalism in checking public corruption for sustainable development in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concepts of Investigative journalism and public corruption

Investigative journalism has no single generally acceptable definition (Gamme, 2019; Ekhareafo, Okoro, & Olley, 2016; Ismail, Ahmad, & Mustaffa, 2014). However, Folarin's (2005) definition is more relevant to this paper. He defines investigative journalism as a branch of development journalism that focuses on critical questioning and evaluation of the usefulness of developmental projects and the efficiency of control by the authorities concerned by X-raying public complaints of misgovernment and probing allegations of corruption which may stand in the way of development. Asemah and Asogwa (2012) observe that the press, through investigative journalism, can check the excesses of public officeholders and hold them accountable, insisting that public corruption in high and low places can be exposed through investigative journalism which will make governments accountable and transparent in their dealings.

Public corruption, on the other hand, is defined as misapplication of public resources to private ends like: collecting bribes, awarding contracts to unqualified companies, diverting public funds, etc. (Salisu, 2000). Tanzi (1995) defines it as the intentional non-compliance with the laid down principle aimed at deriving some advantages for oneself, relatives or friends. Okolo and Akpokighe (2014) identify ten most common features of public corruption capable of undermining national development. They include: giving and receiving bribes, inflation of

contracts, abuse of public property, lodging government fund in private accounts, examination malpractices, adulterating food or drugs, misappropriation and embezzlement of fund, money laundering by public officers, using proxy names to buy property, kick back, and payment upfront. He concludes that any public office holder who indulges in any of the above can be declared corrupt.

Langseth (1999) identifies bribery as the most apparent evidence of public corruption and that the consequences of corruption are more pervasive and profound, as corruption leads to diversion of funds resulting in either poor quality services or total absence. When there is inadequate transparency, accountability, and probity in the use of public resources, the state fails to generate credibility and authority.

Causes of Public Corruption

Although scholars have proposed a number of factors responsible for public corruption, the media stand out because it plays an important role in the fight against public corruption by promoting accountability and transparency in both public and private sectors. Several studies have demonstrated the correlation between press freedom and corruption (Bolsius, 2012; Brunetti & Weder, 2003). Studies have shown that a major factor that encourages corruption is lack of free press that would check the excesses of public office holders and politicians. A high quality, uncensored press sheds light on misuse of power and makes it more difficult to engage in it undetected. According to Transparency International (2013), an independent media is a vital pillar of national integrity and good governance.

If the media fails to offer a key route for information about governmental, administrative and business activities to be disseminated throughout society, and provide the public with a critical capacity to hold those in power accountable by failing to uncover, expose, inform and educate the masses about the detrimental effects of corruption for society at large, the media will promote political fortunes of corrupt politicians and enable them to assume position of leadership and perpetuate corruption (Mendes, 2013).

Public corruption persists in Nigeria just like other developing countries due to weak institutions. Experts argue that the main anti-corruption agency - the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) - is an incompetent body groping in internal graft allegations and political interference. Though it has been eight years since its establishment, the EFCC has fallen far short of its potential and is left with a battered reputation and an uncertain record of accomplishment

(2011 Human Rights Report).

Investigative journalism as a deterrent to public corruption

Media scholars as well as public affairs commentators believe that investigative journalism has a crucial role in the fight against public corruption through raising public awareness, promoting integrity and detecting and reporting corrupt public office holders for prosecution.

Tsegyu (2014) asserts that the mass media through investigative reporting are often looked upon as important institution in the fight against public corruption in any democratic system because of their watchdog function of monitoring the actions and inactions of those in power. The journalists watch and, if need be, review and criticize the activities of public officeholders to promote accountability in governance and enhance national security.

Ibrahimi (2007) identifies investigative journalism, as the most important function of the media in a democratic system. To him the most important role of the media is that of 'watchdog': regular and independent inspection of those in power, including supply of trustworthy information about their activities. By doing this, the media consider themselves as representative of the wider public.

Supporting the above, Alawode (2008) asserts that the very consciousness among the public officeholders that there exists a vibrant press that is ever watching to report corruption could be a deterrent to corruption-inclined officials and individuals. This implies that the presence of a 'vibrant press' that is up and doing, with qualified and dedicated journalists who can investigate and report corruption, is enough deterrent to corrupt public officeholders.

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. Bolsius (2012) insists that high levels of press freedom to investigate and report corruption can lead to low levels of public corruption implying that the more the press is free to carry out its watchdog function, the less the corruption in the society. The major assumption of watchdog concept is that the media are representative of the wider public and at the watchdog over government (Ibrahimi 2007). The watchdog role therefore involves regular and independent inspection of those in power to serve as a deterrent to corrupt public officeholders; thus, the only way reporters can fight corruption is through investigative journalism (Filkov, 2012). Butler (2013) summarizes the concept as 'an unofficial fourth

establishment of democracy' that acts as a balance of power on the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.
Sambe (2005) also asserts that in performing its watchdog or surveillance function, the mass media in Nigeria has kept watch over government, its three arms and the entire society, to keep their performance up to the expected standard of accountability to promote development of the country. People in power whether in government, business, or any other group in society can abuse their power; they can be corrupt, steal money, break laws and do all sorts of things which harm other people and will usually try to keep this information secret. Societies, thus, need journalists who can investigate issues because people have a right to know about the society in which they live; they have a right to know about decisions which may affect them even if people in power want to keep them secret (Ingram & Henshall, 2008).

The media confronts unethical people or practices and may often be the catalyst for a criminal investigation. Na'Allah (2013) identifies investigative journalism as a veritable force that can fight public corruption in Nigeria. He maintains that through investigative journalism, manipulation, exploitation and destruction of lives and properties that have become prominent features of the Nigerian society would be addressed, and by doing that, journalists would be assisting the three arms of government in discharging their mandates.

Olurunyomi (2017) identifies three factors that serve as the lifeblood of any democracy. They include: criticism, independence and investigative press. He explains that effective investigative journalism can resist influence of government officials, advertisers and work objectively without fear or favour. It is only such a free press that can check the appetite of any public office holder to amass power/wealth at the expense of the citizens.

By drawing public attention to any behaviour that is generally perceived as unacceptable and exposing such behaviour as corrupt, mass media can raise public awareness, activate anti-corruption values, and generate outside pressure from the public against corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). The impact of media reportage of public corruption can be 'tangible' and 'intangible.' It is tangible when some visible outcomes are attributed to a particular news story or series of stories. For instance, the launching of investigation by authorities, the scrapping of a law or policy promoting opportunities for corruption, the impeachment or forced resignation of a crooked politician, the firing of an official, the launching of judicial proceedings, the issuing of public recommendations by a watchdog body, and so on. It is intangible when checks on public corruption arise from the

broader social climate of enhanced political pluralism, enlivened public debate and a heightened sense of accountability among politicians, public bodies and institutions that are inevitably the by-product of a hard-hitting, independent news media (Stapenhurst, (2000).

Investigative journalism can serve as a deterrent to corruption. Alawode (2008) opines that reporting of public corruption has led to the removal, resignation and prosecution of some highly placed officials in Nigeria like the former Inspector General of Police, Tafa Balogun (*The Guardian,* April 4, 2005), former Speaker Patricia Etteh (*Newswatch,* 9 September, 2007) and former Senate President Adolphus Wabara (*Vanguard,* 6 May, 2004).

Due to the desire, greed, and hunger to acquire wealth by whatever means necessary, top military officers syphoned funds from government coffers in order to sustain their exorbitant life styles. Millions of dollars have been recovered from the accounts and homes of the military officers. It was overwhelming to discover that one of the top military officers who had a mansion in Badagry area of Lagos, Nigeria gave strict directives that there should be two sewage chambers. One was wired for the storage of waste while the other was dug and fitted with expensive tiles and had drainage channels in case of flood. This was discovered when the men of the EFCC raided the property after an intelligence report and discovered the sum of $1million stored in plastic containers and then submerged into the sewage chamber or soak-away (Ladan-Baki, 2016).

Successful action against corruption is dependent on knowledge and information delivered by media. First, media raise public awareness about public corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies and thus can foster a culture of integrity. Secondly, media can investigate, detect and report incidences of corruption, bringing corruption cases into the public and provoking judicial judgment on them (OECD, 2013). Through their investigative reportage of happenings, the media serve as watchdog of the society by monitoring and disseminating the activities of government and making it accountable to people and less corrupt as spelt out in section 22 of the 1999 constitution.

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 Offshore leaks, 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 (UNODC, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Klitgaard's 1988 model on the causes of corruption, mathematically illustrated as **C = M + D - A** where **Corruption** equals **Monopoly** plus **Discretion** minus **Accountability**. This implies that the more the accountability through investigative journalism, the less the public corruption. The model assumes that more accountability as a result of a vibrant press leads to less corruption. This is because increasing accountability will subject public officials to more rigorous oversight and monitoring by the media.

The model argued that the media watch-dog function is premised on the idea that a fully independent press keeps government as well as public office holders accountable, believing that exposing any social ills or vices attract negative repercussions and serves as a deterrent to others. It also earns the country international accolades as being a free state, checks and balances excessive use of power by leaders and most importantly contributes towards national development (Ibrahimi, 2007).

Political scientists and communication scholars have described the media as highly effective instrument for accountability in governance (Tsegyu, 2014; OECD, 2013; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). This is corroborated by section 22 of the Nigerian constitution.

A complementary model, proposed by Kaufmann (1999), focused on knowledge and data as a prerequisite for anti-corruption as illustrated in the following:
AC (Anti-corruption Efforts) = KI (Knowledge and Information) + LE (Leadership) + CA (Collective Action). In other words, successful Anti-Corruption programmes (AC) are dependent on Knowledge and Information (KI) plus Leadership (LE) plus collective action (AC). Here again, the importance of information and the involvement of civil society, including the media, is central.

Conclusion

Corruption in Nigeria, just as in most African countries, has become the greatest challenge to leaders and citizens, it undermines effective governmental financial management and is also a threat to economic development and national security in developing countries (Dandago, 2008). Corruption is always subversive, running counter to the norms of the system in which it operates; if left unchecked it can take over and destroy the entire society. This is because once established, it quickly becomes not just deep-rooted but also contaminating because it breeds quickly. It thrives in weak institutions, and is facilitated by absence of vibrant media, unstable politics, inequality and poverty.

The study validates Klitgaard's 1988 model on causes of corruption which argues that lack of accountability is caused by absence of viable media, which promotes corruption and leads to national insecurity. Also, the degree to which a Media is independent is proportional to its ability to perform an Effective Public Watchdog Function (EPWF) to prevent corruption and promote national development. Media ideally should play a major role in creating an atmosphere in public life that discourages fraud and corruption so as to avoid issues that can lead to insecurity.

Also, an independent and transparent media help in upholding accountability and accuracy in judgment, and also provide good governance to the public which are necessary ingredients in establishing national security and sustainable development.

Recommendations

In view of the findings made in the study, the following recommendations are hereby submitted:

1. Government should always liaise with the media to come up with a workable national security policy in Nigeria.
2. Government should support investigative journalists in their efforts towards exposing corrupt practices that have negative effects on our national security.
3. Media should design programmes to stress the negative effects of corruption on national security.
4. Media org. and institutions should organize regular training for reporters on IJ reporting.
5. IJ should utilize social media platforms like Youtube, Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp in case of threat from media owners.

References

Abraham, R. (2012). Media and national security. Daryaganj, New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd 4676/21. https:// www. researchgate .net/ publication /33413 1117 _ Media_and_National_Security

Alli, Y. (2013, Dec. 16). Nigerians yet to reap benefits of FOI Act. *National Mirror* http://nationalmirroronline.net/new/nigerians -yet-to-reap-benefi-ts-of-foi-act-sans/ Accessed on 1st-7-16

Besley, T. & Prat, A. (2006). Handcuffs for the grabbing hand? Media capture and government accountability. *American Economic Review, 96*(3), 720-36.

Dandago, K. I. (2008). The constitutional fight against corruption in Nigeria: Is it enough? *Int. J. Govt. Financ. Manage.,* 8, 61-70.

Färdigh, Mathias A. (2013). What's the use of a free media – The role of media in curbing corruption and promoting quality of government.

Filkov, G. (2012). Investigative Journalism. Macedonian anti-corruption watchdog. Center for Civil Communications. http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/birn-summer-school/birn-panelists-explore-media-role-in-probing-corruption.

Hunter, M. L., & Hanson, N. (2011). What is investigative journalism? Investigative journalism is not reporting as usual. http://unesdoc.unesco .org/images /0019/001930/ 193078e.pdf

Hussain, N. (2008). The role of media in national security: A case study of 1998 Nuclear Explosions by Pakistan. *SASSI Research Report*, 13 (20). 2

Ibrahimi, L. (2007). The watchdog role of the media - Media as the fourth estate. http://rrezja.blogspot.com/2007/01/watchdog-role-of-media.html

Ingram, D. & Henshall, P. (2008). The news manual: Introduction to investigative reporting. Chapter 39 .http://www.thenewsmanual.net/index.htm

Johnson, D. V. (1994). The impact of the media on national security policy decision making. https:// www.files. ethz. ch/isn/109563/ Impact_ Media_ National _Security. pdf

Dandago, K. I. (2008). The constitutional fight against corruption in Nigeria: Is it enough? *Int. J. Govt. Financ. Manage., 8*, 61-70.

Ekeanyanwu, N. T. (2000). The Nigerian press coverage of political conflicts in a pluralistic society. http://www.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/Profiles/Ekeanyanwu-Nnamdi/The-Nigeria-Press-Coverage-of-Political-Conflicts-in-a-Pluralistic-Society

Kaufmann, Daniel. (1999). Presentation given to World Bank staff, April 1999.

Ladan-Baki, I. S. (2016). Arms procurement mirage, corruption and insurgency in Nigeria. *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance*, VII (7) .3 Quarter III2016. http://onlineresearchjournals.com/ijopagg/art/213.pdf

Langseth, P. (1999). Prevention: An effective tool to reduce corruption. Centre for International Crime Prevention, Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention, United Nations Office, Vienna. https://www. unodc.org/ documents/ corruption / Publications /1999/ Prevention_An_Effective_Tool_to_Reduce_Corruption.pdf

Mendes, M. (2013). Overview of corruption in the media in developing countries. Transparency International U4 Expert Answer.

Na'Allah, A. (2013, May 6). Nigeria: Journalists not fighting corruption. *Daily Trust.*

Norris, Pippa. (2008). The role of the free press in promoting democratization, good governance, and human development. In Mark Harvey (Ed.), *Media matters. Perspectives on advancing governance & development* (pp. 66-75). Internews Europe/Global Forum for Media Development.

Okolo, P. O., Akpokighe, R.O., & Igbokwe, H. I. (2014). The need for ethnic integration in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A focus of Western Niger Delta. *Journal of Development Country Studies, 4* (4), 152- 163. IISTE USA. http://www.iiste.org/- journals / index.php/DCS/article/view/11117.

Olorunyomi, D. (2017). *Investigative reporting and the crisis of Nigerian journalism*. A paper presented at a public lecture on Investigative and Data-driven Journalism held on May 23rd, 2017.

Otto, G., & Ukpere, W. I. (2012). National security and development in Nigeria. *African Journal of Business Management*, 6 (23), 6765-6770. http://www.academicjournals.org/AJBM DOI: 10.5897/AJBM12.155

Pope (2000). *Confronting corruption, The elements of a national integrity system*. London: Transparency International.

Rose-Ackerman, S. (1999). Corruption and governance: causes, consequences and reform. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/ 2009/wp72_2009.pdf

Salisu, M. (2000). *Corruption in Nigeria*. Lancaster University Management School Working Paper 2000/006. *The LUMS Working Papers Series*. http://www. lums.co. uk/ publications

Sambe J. A. (2005). *Introduction to mass communication practice in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.

Soreide, T. (2019). Combating corruption: Investigative journalists on the frontlines. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331676641

Sowunmi et al. (2010). The role of media in curbing corruption in Nigeria. *Research Journal of Information Technology, 2*(1), 7-23, 2010. Lagos: Maxwell Scientific Organization. http://maxwellsci.com/print/rjit/v2-7-23.pdf

Stapenhurst, R. (2000). The media role in curbing corruption. World Bank Institute. http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance/pdf/media.pdf

Suntai, D. I. & Shem, W. (2018). Tackling institutional corruption through investigative journalism. *Global Media Journal,* 16(30).

Tanzi, V. (1995). Corruption: Arm's-length relationships and markets. Fiorentini, G., & Pelzman, S. M (Eds.), *The economics of organized crime.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Transparency International (2013). UN Convention against Corruption: Progress Report 2013, Berlin.

Tsegyu, S. (2014). The media, corruption and democratic accountability in Nigeria's fourth republic. *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities,* 3 (1), 9, 179-198.

UNODC (2013). Reporting on corruption: A resource tool for governments and journalists. https://www.unodc.org/documents/ corruption/Publications /2013/ Resource _Tool _ for_Governments_and_Journalists_COSP5_ebook.pdf

UNODC (2020). The role of the media in fighting corruption. https :// www. unodc .org/e4j/en/anti-corruption/module-10/key-issues/the-role-of-the-media-in-fighting-corruption.html

Weder, B., & Brunetti, A. (2003). A free press is bad news for corruption. *Journal of Public Economics, 87*(7-8), 1801-24.