

Mass Media Interest and Corruption in Nigeria

OLADOKUN OMOJOLA

Abstract

This paper discusses corruption as a communication process because it involves categories of participants who operate in the sender-receiver context and who must respond to one another before the vice can be performed. It wouldn't make much difference whether one looks at it either from the public or private sector perspective. However, the paper stresses that the effect of corrupt practices is more devastating from the government standpoint, owing to the fact that public interest is involved, especially when public interest is operationalized in the majoritarian perspective where the interests of the generality of citizens take pre-eminence. The paper advances some fundamental reasons while the media in Nigeria have not been able to contribute effectively to the on-going efforts at tackling the menace of corruption. These include the absence of any viable socio-political ideology from where the media can get any reasonable clue about government's anti-corruption systems, weak statutory guarantees, media commercialism and the utter neglect of some stakeholders in the media industry, whose proper recognition as partners in the media trade, could have gone a long way in reducing incidents of corruption in the land.

Keywords: Communication Process, Corruption, Mass Media, Media Stakeholders

Introduction

Communication, no doubt, contributes to socio-economic development. The media, with their integrative and interactive abilities (Boadu, 1981:193), have shaped the socio-economic development of communities. Evidence abounds to show how the convergence of communication (as conveyed in mass media contents) and political leadership has affected the socio-economic

development especially when development is viewed as social and material advancement (Rogers, 1969) or improvement in the quality of life, self-reliance and improved living conditions (Dissayanake, 1985; Linden, 1989 in Okunna, 1995). Mass media contents have been found to affect voting decisions (Shields, Goidel, & Tadlock, 1995); reproductive behaviour (Westoff & Rodriguez, 1995); spirituality (Onabajo, 2007); political knowledge (McLeod, Rush & Friedrich, 1968); party politics and candidate saliency (Watenberg, 1982); electoral choice and voting stability (Norpoth & Baker, 1980) and so on. Striking correlation has also been established between the mass media and economic development (Schramm, 1964; McNelly, 1966) in Western and Latin American countries. But can the same be said of media with regard to corruption? In developing countries, particularly in Nigeria, have the media in any way helped in reducing corruption?

It is important to note that the expectation of the media with regard to their contribution to development lies in their ability to put the government of the day under close monitoring. This is made manifest in the media's watchdog's role in examining the conduct of public servants, especially the politicians, which is a task that is germane to democracy. This democratic task becomes challenging, owing to the fact that democratic institutions in Nigeria and Africa are still evolving and therefore require the efforts of midwives whose responsibility is performed by the media. Mass media performance concerning public sector ethics and civil servants morality should be seen as significant and therefore requires a close scrutiny.

By articulating the relationship between the government and its citizens, stimulating the citizenry for political participation and encouraging the leaders to deliver on corruption-free promises, the media in Nigeria have become instruments of significance. They constitute an essential part of the society as well as the political structure (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1990); their agenda have strong influence on top decision makers (Rogers & Dearing,

1994:91) and they constantly try to make themselves relevant in the society in a manner that puts them at a vantage position.

This view is supported by Perloff (1998) who recognizes the three parties (government, citizens and the media) as the main actors clamouring for space on the public stage. To him, they constitute the golden triangle of political communication – an equilateral triangulation of the political process - whereby each party is a functional partaker, effectively adding value and contributing to development. Some scholars, in spite of their pessimism (Conway, Ahern & Wyckoff, 1981; Owen, 2000), still believe that the media perform a useful integrating role. According to Light (1991:86, cited in Edwards III & Wood, 1999), “the media is not a source of new ideas; it is ... a bridge to the political environment.”

Media Performance and Corruption: Results of preliminary Investigation

In the first quarter of 2003, this writer had a casual interaction with some Nigerians in Lagos State. Members of the group, which were nine in number, had diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The interaction was conducted to obtain their perspectives and explore their degree of consensus (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993) on *poverty level*, the *government* and *press operations* in the Nigeria. The time spent with the group was 90 minutes, and in accordance with the propositions of Merton & Kendall (1946), an interview guide comprising among other things, the questions about the three variables, was used to moderate the interactions all of which were conducted in English. A similar focus group interaction took place in the last quarter of the same year with parameters of discussion slightly varied.

Responses were strikingly similar, filled with emotions and characterized by a multiplicity of perspectives. These perspectives are presented in the following summary.

1. Nearly all the group members were consumers of the contents of the dominant media that were evaluated. They also claimed

proper recall of these contents during the discussions. The evaluated media included three newspapers: *Punch*, *The Guardian* and *Vanguard*; two magazines: *Tell* and *The News*; and television stations: *African Independent Television (AIT)* and *NTA Channel 10*. In fact, some of the discussants said that daily subscription to *Punch* and *The Guardian* was made mandatory in their working places.

2. The discussants agreed that poverty in Nigeria emerged and persisted because of public sector corruption.

3. They also generally agreed that if the media had been fearless in performing their watchdog role, corruption in Nigeria would not have assumed the present embarrassing level.

4. The media would fail to criticize government where it was in a position to give advertisement insertions or commercials.

5. As long as the media continue to embrace commercialism to the detriment of public interest, the incidence of corruption, with a concomitant poverty of the citizens, would continue unabated. Public interest in this case was operationalized in the majoritarian perspective or commonly-held value (Sorauf, 1957: 619-623). These are values which are widely accepted and have the potentials of universality. The commonly-held interests are distinguished by the large number of people who share them. Here, the public is involved and not just some sectors of the public.

These findings support an assertion – that media performance or responsibility has a relationship with the level of corruption. In other words, corruption in a polity is not simply a result of leadership incompetence or corrupt practices, but significantly the inability or refusal of the country's mainstream media to hold the leadership accountable in order to prevent or alleviate corruption.

Corruption, Communication and Public Interest

Before identifying the factors responsible for the ineffective role of the media in reducing corruption, it is necessary to operationalize this negative act in the manner it presently exists or is *practised* in Nigeria. Corruption is often defined as illegal and immoral behavior which

produces gains that are not in the public interest. Corruption is often thought of as illegitimate use of power for private gains (Werlin, 1972:249). Simply put, corruption is the abuse of public office for private gain of the public office holder and his associates.

Corruption is a practice. Being a practice clearly suggests that it is a system. Being a system therefore suggests that it is a process. Being a process ultimately suggests a mechanism whereby parts are involved and each of these parts is serving as a functional partaker before the whole system can work effectively. Corruption is therefore a *polygonized* process whereby sides are involved and each of these sides must contribute or perform its task effectively in order to make it function effectively. It does not end there. Inherent in any mechanism or mechanistic system is communication. For a mechanism to work as constructed, the various parts must communicate with one another. The implication of this is that if each of the parts should go to sleep, or does not communicate, then the mechanism, which in this case is corruption, will not be possible or extremely difficult. Essentially, therefore, corruption is a communication process. From the foregoing, *corruption can therefore be defined as a communication process involving the abuse of office and which produces gains personal, rather than in public interest.*

The communication dimension involved has further engendered the issue of social mixing since communication can be a promoter of cultural and social integration. The functional definition of corruption greatly cherishes this approach: that communication does not simply involve doing some kind of transaction with each other but it also brings people together. The number of parts of involved will tell what exactly the type of communication process involved. Is it simply the linear process where one side communicates and the other simply responds? Or is it one source to many, many to one or many to many? The fact is that corruption as a process can take the form of any of these and would not discriminate based on the number of participants in the process.

It is important to note that the public interest dimension is what makes an act of corruption a serious matter. Corruption in a government

set-up, for instance, is a communication process in a context. In the public sector corruption, many interests which are not those of the communicating parties are involved and therein lay the evils of the acts of corruption. In some cases, a section of the communicating parties comprises legitimate representatives of the owners of those interests. This is what happens in a representative democracy be it presidential or parliamentary system. Members of the legislative houses in several African countries are guilty of corruption, as many of them have been found to neglect their oversight functions and pursue personal interests to the utter detriment of the interests of those who elected them into office. The same situation applies with the executive arm of government.

When the public interest is defined in terms of the interest of the majority in the country, acts of corruption from public servants, whether as political office holders or civil servants, have the potentials of being detected. This is simply because interests of thousands or millions of people are involved and acts of corruption are capable of producing negative effects on the socio-political lives of people which could engender hues and cries that could reveal the acts. In Nigeria, the negative effects of corruption are easily made manifest in the country's dilapidated infrastructure, collapsing educational system, and general moral laxity. It is easy to conclude that public sector corruption is largely responsible for this, even in the absence of reliable data to justify this conclusion.

However, when public interest is operationalized as *wise or superior interest* (Sorauf, 1957: 619-623), corruption becomes more complex. Advocates of this perspective believe it commands a special priority among interests because of its (supposedly) inherent wisdom and its high level of desirability. Unlike the commonly-held value perspective where the interest of *everybody* is involved and *everybody* is believed to be pursuing that interest or can be seen to be doing so, the superior interest proposition creates a room for distinct advocates of public interest which can easily be recognized. For instance, steel development in Nigeria is considered wise because it is a catalyst for the country's

industrial development. The primary beneficiaries are not the majority of Nigerians but industrialists who must first of all source the steel as raw materials to produce finished goods such as cars, iron rods and so forth for the public. Owing to the fact that majority of Nigerians are not directly involved, much corruption is often perpetrated and goes unnoticed for a long time. This is one of the reasons why, in Nigeria, corrupt acts of many years are recently being detected, often making it difficult to bring the perpetrators to book.

Corruption and Media Performance

The natural inability of the citizens to monitor the conduct of officials makes it imperative for the media to do the job. Media performance is therefore germane to democracy. Poor media performance seriously puts the citizenry under the yoke of political office holders or civil servants who seem to have the natural tendency to be corrupt. In spite of the fact that the media have been an active member of the country's political triangulation as stated earlier, corruption has been on the increase. In 2007, the multilateral corruption monitoring body, Transparency International rated Nigeria as one of the most corrupt in the world and put the country side by side with such very backward countries as Haiti and Bangladesh. Evidence of corruption is shown in the citizens' constant criticism of government officials all at the federal, state or local government levels.

In any political or development communication process, citizens should be allowed to have their input (Obasanjo & Mabogunje, 1991). The essence of participatory communication is to encourage discussion with government and among the various segments of the society, promote social mobilization, thereby enhancing civic vitality, which is an indicator of socio-economic development. Such vitality has been a scarce commodity in Nigeria because, of the 49 years of Nigeria as a politically independent nation more than half were spent under various military regimes which operated the linear communication that oppressed the media and confined the audience of government to the sidelines. The linear

perspective, which puts a dominating government on one end, citizens on the other and the media standing between, has been the preponderant characteristic of the process in many developing countries.

Obasanjo & Mabogunje (1991:119-120) in their presentation on the government's dominant role in the development communication process in Nigeria, stress that in such a domineering situation, the media become agents of a one-way or ineffective communication that neglects the contribution of the citizens. This implies that development programmes are communicated only from government's point of view and create a dismal socio-economic profile of the citizens as a result of corruption. Such was the situation that prevailed in Nigeria in 1999 (cf. Kaul & Tomaselli, 1999:378) when the military dictatorship handed over to a democratically elected government whose term expired in 2003.

Even under the democratically elected government, the reality of dependency has put the citizens at the mercy of government as the latter is always accused of not working in the public interest. This was drawn against the background of the citizens' perception that socio-economic conditions in 2008 did not show any marked improvement over those of 1999 despite the achievements claimed by the Olusegun Obasanjo administration who rule between 1999 and 2007 and the usually trumpeted servant leadership claims of President Musa Yaradua who started his rule in 2007. On the other hand, some die hard politicians still assert that they should be commended for their performance and that the accusation of unfulfilled electoral promises and lackadaisical attitude towards the citizens should be dismissed. The question that arises at this point is: Where does the press stand in this leader-citizen's crossfire and what are the reasons responsible for the continuous incidence of corruption in spite of the continued performance of the media?

Fundamental Reasons Hindering Media Performance in a Corrupt Nigeria

The foregoing questions can be reframed in this manner: If the media do perform their role, is that role effective? (Francke, 1995: 110) Getting a straight answer to the question may not be easy. However, evidence is available to prove that some conditions do exist in Nigeria that seem to justify the fundamental and immediate incapability of the Nigerian media to contribute meaningfully to the eradication of acts of corruption in Nigeria. They include the following.

Absence of Socio-political Ideology Based on Integrity

Primarily, the contending forces in the nation's polity lack easily identifiable ideologies that promote honesty and integrity and which can elicit sympathy or a following (Obiyan, 1999: 43). The presence of clear ideologies can make one "focus attention on the differences between parties" (Downs, 1957, cited in Pierce, 1970:25), especially with regard to the system that promote integrity and good governance. In this case, ideology is defined as action-oriented, normative system of ideas that depict social reality (Arian, 1966:269) and tolerates good governance.

The lack of such ideas on which Nigeria's socio-political economy can be based has rippling effects on many institutions among which are the media. Unfortunately, most of the media houses, especially those owned by the government are not asking questions in this regard as they blindly support their owners. Most of the broadcast stations are guilty of this. The print media do not have any cogent evidence of performance in this regard either. This is not the case in most developed countries. According to Goldenberg & Traugott (1987:448), most newspapers in Denmark belong either to the Conservatives or the Agrarian Liberals who are noted for their long term policy goals (Batory & Sitter, 2004) that promote the integrity of the polity as well as the welfare of citizens. They have a chequered history and ideological base that dates back to centuries and which is replicated in several other European countries. Some of these countries are among the least corrupt in the world. In Nigeria, political parties lack such base and this perhaps is the reason why politics centers around personalities rather than on issues and in most cases these are highly corrupt personalities with history bereft of honor.

Weak Statutory and Constitutional Guarantees

Also fundamental to the inability of the media to adequately monitor corrupt Nigerian officials and bring them to book is the non-existence of statutory or precise constitutional empowerment on a level-playing field. For instance, Circulation of Newspapers Decree 2 of 1966 and defamatory, Offensive Publications Decree 44 of 1966 and Newspaper Registration Decree No. 48 of 1993 which are the archetypes of the ones that existed during the dark days of military regimes, were used to oppress the media upon any of their attempt to make government officials accountable. The post independent government oppression of the media was a natural carryover from the colonial era when such draconian laws as the 1903 Newspaper Ordinance and the 1909 Seditious Offenses Ordinance were used to punish journalists and scare away investors who were interested in the newspaper business.

Constitutional guarantees are not strong enough to make the media effective in a dishonest polity where corruption has become food that must be eaten everyday in order to survive. The 1989, 1993, and 1999 constitutions of Nigeria actually imposed some obligations on the media to put public officials under close watch and monitor governance on behalf Nigerians. These obligations are regarded valid on the platform of the right to the freedom of expression which encompasses the freedom to hold opinions and receive and impart ideas without interference. It is interesting to note that the same constitutions paradoxically provide restrictions to these rights, albeit in a veiled manner. For instance, Section 41 of 1979 constitution states that:

nothing in the right to freedom of expression shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justified in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health or for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons.

Government officials have hung on this anticlimax statement to oppress journalists and scare them away from satisfactory performance of their responsibility. One of such cases was in 2006 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. The inability of the constitution to guarantee the right of journalists to perform their role as government watchdogs is a major reason responsible for the initiation of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill which is designed to empower any Nigerian in his or her quest to access information from government or private individuals. For years, the bill has languished in the House of Assembly. The erstwhile President, Olusegun Obasanjo, refused to assent to the bill and reasons for the refusal were not given. The incumbent, President Musa Yaradua, is said to not be opposed to the bill as part of the strategy to make Nigerians believe in the much trumpeted zero-tolerance on corruption. Time will tell if this anti-corruption posture of the President is anything to go by. The bill has been re-introduced into the House of Assembly, awaiting another round of debates from lawmakers.

Presence of the Highly Relevant but Usually Unnoticed Media Stakeholders

One of the greatest drawbacks of the on-going search for global media ethics is to think it as a linear process which looks at media performance from the perspective of the journalist and his audience. This gives the impression that the media are only responsible to those who read newspapers, watch television or listen to radio. The search has prioritized journalists and their audience to the utter neglect of some critical stakeholders without which the practice of journalism will be difficult if not impossible. Particularly neglected is the category of media users which is of interest to this article.

Example of such media users are advertisers, advertising agents, public relations agents, political office holders, political office seekers and political parties. The bulk of the funds that the media need to survive

come from them and not from media content consumers whose financial input into the media industry is limited to the peanuts paid in buying the newspaper or subscribing to television. In many cases, they access these media free of charge, as in radio broadcasting. The importance of advertising income to the survival and profitability of the media cannot be overemphasized. Tesler (1966: 461) stresses the vantage position a news organization enjoys when it has an abundance of commercials. According to Tebbel (1966: 80), advertising is “the lifeblood of journalism and the unconscious determinant of its moral tone. Larry Killman, the Director of Communication of World Association of Newspapers also has this to say on the crucial nature of advertisement (UNESCO, 2005):

...we can generally be satisfied that the media in prosperous, democratic nations play their role in both information distribution and as a watchdog on power and they can do so because they get their money from advertisers – in most cases more than half of their income, and in many cases far more than half.

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 and the trumpeted protection of the interests of media audience. The commercial objective of profit making, which is in line with the patronage of these users, can conflict with ethics of editorial objectivity. The income from these media users is becoming increasingly important by the day in the face of dwindling reader patronage in many cases as a result of illiteracy and the usually low purchasing power of Nigerians. As long as income from media users forms the bastion of media performance, the media task of holding public officials accountable in the interest of the public will remain elusive.

Corrupt Media

Media commercialism does not only hinder journalism practice; it also undermines its integrity. The valid but immoral claim of a typical news organization to break even and make profit on the platform of commercialism has invoked the fortitude of celebrating the sources of advertising incomes. This corporate spirit has found its way into the heart of the typical Nigerian journalist who seems to have caved in to corruption tendencies. The situation is compounded by the fact that many journalists in this country are poorly paid, thereby resulting in this vice of corruption that is demonstrated in the form of bribery and other types of indirectly solicited gifts. Therefore, for Nigerian journalists to carry out their responsibility creditably, a code of ethics that is practical enough to checkmate these vices should be formulated.

However, a caution exists at this point. A study of Nigerian and some other cultures in Africa, has shown that one should be careful with regard to what constitutes gifts. Offering foods and drinks and giving transportation assistance, which is common practice oftentimes journalists are invited to an event, are in line with the tradition and customs of many ethnic groups in the country (Omojola, 2008:). The Igbo, for example, have several ways of maintaining the equilibrium of the typical African social system, the centerpiece of which is hospitality. Uchendu (1964: 47) stresses that one of the ways by which Igbo hospitality is shown is through the kolanut – the traditional medium of welcoming a guest and establishing or reinforcing their interaction. Kolanuts are only symbolic as other gift items are now frequently used. The practice of offering gifts is also common among the Yoruba and Hausa and several other ethnic groups. Such altruistic practice is common among the Nguni people of South Africa (Hammond-Tooke, 1963) and in Western Zaire (Lux, 1972: 174-175). The big question is: When does a gift turn into an enticement and when does an enticement translate into bribery in journalism practice? Until media ethic searchers are able to resolve this question among many others, media watchdog role will continue to be undermined and the regime of corruption in the country will remain an albatross.

Recommendations and Conclusion

As pointed out earlier, the media industry is an agglomeration of several stakeholders which include media scholars, professional communicators or journalists, media owners, newsmakers and media users. Each of these stakeholders has its own interests and is passionate about them and will engage any instrumentality to protect them. The diversity which characterizes these interests has made it totally impossible for the media to focus on its fourth estate responsibility which is holding government accountable to its citizens as enshrined in the constitution. The major challenge facing the media industry is the inability or probably refusal of mass media scholars to articulate these interests involved and put each of them in the proper perspective. Scholars, by virtue of their epistemological fountain, are naturally endowed to ensure that this is done. Unfortunately, their challenge of not being able to properly operationalize and articulate these interests, has helped to undermine the inability of the media to hold government officials accountable.

For instance, media owners are into business, not journalism. This implies that their primary aim is to make profit. Media users such as public relations and advertising professionals have identical objectives as media owners. The work of the advertising agency is to create or widen the market for its clients in order to make or boost profit. Newsmakers are interested in their image and how they can profit from their exposure though such profit may not be in terms of cash. Even the journalists, though concerned with their audience, are not in the trade to be paupers, which means that the usually assumed unidirectional system of interest towards their audience will need to be reconsidered. Media scholars are researchers and teachers to the journalists and they are supposed to be the arrowheads of mass media research. In view of this variegated interests and the passion to protect them, this article therefore advocates the following:

- a stakeholders conference where these interests are debated and a common front is presented with regard to the rules guiding the conduct of journalists. Media scholars should champion this process.

- the current code of conduct which assesses media performance in terms of the journalist and his or her audience must be reexamined. This linear process of assessment is unacceptable, as it does not provide the push by which journalists can make public officials accountable.
- The eventual code of ethics should be such that takes into cognizance the interests of the various stakeholders in such a manner that does not jeopardize the interests of media content consumers who are the primary audience of journalists.

By getting round this challenge of internal disconnection, stakeholders would be able to present a media system that is ready to confront the country's political challenges on a common front. The starting point of task will be to reorient the political system toward that which is ideologically secure. Security in this sense is anchored on integrity that must characterize the system which revolves round politicians, political parties, political office holders, government institutions as well as the citizens. This is expected to be a deliberate media campaign to ensure that the correct system is enthroned. If this is achieved, then the battle against corruption has the potential of being won.

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Oladokun Omojola Ph.D. Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria. e-mail: dokunomojola@yahoo.com. Tel: 08037261005