

Assessing the Media's Watchdog Role in Ensuring the Accountability of the Nigerian Government

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Abstract - This paper attempts to assess the performance of the media in their watchdog role as it relates to ensuring the accountability of the government to the electorate in Nigeria. The 21st century media are saddled with the responsibility of providing the citizenry with substantial information to help them make informed decisions. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) synergized with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have aided freer flow of information from the media to the electorate. To ensure a successful democratic governance and sustainable development, the media have the responsibility to communicate the actions of the government to its citizens and relaying the feedback to the government through opinion pages and public affairs programmes, among others. Since inhibitions on the path of freedom of information have been removed with the hopes to enhance media capacity to freely divulge information, this paper, therefore, examines how well the media are living up to the expectation of grooming an informed populace. It explores how well informed the citizens are about their rights to demand greater accountability from the government, as a result of media messages. It also investigates the citizens' views about the media's fairness in reporting government activities. The study would employ the survey research method. The social responsibility theory and the development media theory will be the axles around which the study will revolve. Suggestions will be made on how the media can further enlighten the citizens to become active participants in national development.

Key Words: *media, good governance, watchdog, accountability.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The media, particularly the press, are commonly referred to as the fourth estate of the realm, thereby crystallizing their importance in a democratic society. Not only do the media

provide information for electorates to make informed choices during elections, they also monitor governmental activities and report progress or lack of it after candidates have been voted into power for constant evaluation. The realization of this all important role of the media, therefore, makes them a bride to court during electoral processes by politicians. Efforts are made to constantly appear in the news and have their rallies extensively reported. Huge sum of money is also invested into advertisements and advertorials all in the realization of the vast reach and great influence of the media.

It is, however, unfortunate that once the candidates are voted to power, they tend to disconnect with the electorates and fail to adequately seek their input in governance or inform them on progress made. Irrespective of the elected officials' desire to communicate, however, the media have the responsibility to finding information that are relevant to the public and that can help them to hold their elected representatives accountable. This study, therefore, examines the watchdog function of the media and how they help the public to hold the government accountable.

II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Traditionally, the media are saddled the responsibility to inform, educate, entertain and perform surveillance function within the milieu of her operations. Similarly, the power of the media has been recognized and has been continuously exploited in recent years considering its influence in the quest to obtain, maintain and transfer political power. With the knowledge of this, therefore, politicians over the years have made promises using the media's capacity to reach a wider spectrum of audience in a bid to canvas for votes during the electioneering periods. It becomes imperative that media be responsible enough to highlight, remind and vocalize to the general public how well the promises made (over their own air waves) are being fulfilled. Without adequate, accurate and timely information being provided, the electorates will be in doubt as to their rights to demand greater levels of

accountability from their representatives in political offices. This 'watchdog' function is known to maintain checks and balances in the operation of government activities. Hence, it becomes a problem when the media do not report government activities or at least create awareness amongst the citizenry in such a way that will empower them to demand greater accountability from the elected representatives across all levels of government.

A. Research Question

1. To what extents to do the audience believe the media are living up to their responsibility of informing them?
2. To what extent do media messages inform citizens on their rights to demand greater accountability from the government?
3. What is the perspective of Nigerians about the media's fairness in reporting government activities?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a democracy, good governance requires that leaders at every cadre, those responsible for policy-making, implementation, public expenditure, etc., be held accountable for their actions or performance. The dais for the government to get to the governed and vice-versa can only be made possible through the media. According to Devereux (2003, p.7), the media have gradually become a vital component of democratic politics process by serving as a means to advertise the government of the day and its activities for the citizens and by all means, monitor to ensure that those promises get fulfilled. The citizens, therefore, can only effectively use their power to enforce good governance, if they have reliable information from the media. Alabi (2005, p.24) believes that the media have the "statutory responsibility for making the government accountable for its acts of commission and omission. The media is the voice of the people that ask the government questions on their behalf and they are responsible to 'compel' action on the part of the government to fulfill its electoral promises to the electorate".

It is germane to state at this point that no nation can boast of development without free expression, publication and distribution of ideas, views and opinions [1]. Media freedom is crucial in this digital age. In Lasswell's (1978) work, he pointed out that media freedom enhances the watchdog role which the media play in checking and overseeing the performance of the government and its officials. The media are expected to hold the government accountable to the electorate; check its excesses as well as protect the interest of the public.

From all indications, human beings thrive and prevail in a media environment (The MacBride Commission, 2004, p.57), this, Balkin and Cotterrell [3] state would enhance openness and accountability in its government system. Scholars have also come to the conclusion that democratic societies can only function sustainably when the people are well informed and can share and debate ideas freely [4].

A. The Social Responsibility Theory

This theory believes that the citizenry will perform their responsibilities to the society if reminded of such duties periodically. If the media does not perform these duties, the government should encourage the media to comply. This came after a series of debate as to whether the media should be authoritarian (fully censored) or libertarian (free). The media is meant to act in the best interest of the society and it is supposed to do no harm to both the citizens and the government. It helps to maintain and prosper democracy.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This paper necessitated a quantitative research design. A survey was carried out as a more appropriate research methodology. The reason for the choice of a survey was premised on the need to measure opinion, and not just the manifest content of media messages (News reports, Television broadcast or Newspaper editorials, etc.). In assessing opinions, therefore, a survey gives the researchers a more representative result from the study population. For this study, 200 copies of the questionnaire were administered to residents of the Ado-Odo- Ota Local Government Area of Ogun State, with 196 copies properly completed and returned. The study population was selected purposively for this research exercise. Elections held in this Local Government Area during the last electioneering season, candidates campaigned and the residents of this Local Government also voted. The presence of these factors further justifies the selection of the study population.

V. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A. Research Question 1: To what extents to do the audience believe the media are living up to their responsibility of informing them?

As pertaining to the informative responsibility of the media to its users; over 88% of the respondents agreed that the media ought to report on government activities and not keep them in the dark as to the policies, actions and intentions of the government. This is in tandem with the viewpoint of Devereux (2003, p.7) and Akpoveta [2]: both Scholars opine that citizens of any nation can only be effective in reforms and the enforcement of good governance when reliable and ample information are placed at their disposal.

Table 1: Programmes or publications that best enlighten respondents about government activities

Programme type	Percentage (%)
Current Affairs	36.7
Social debates	10.7
Political interviews	29.1
Newspaper commentaries	19.9
Editorials	3.6
Total	100.0 n=196

Following the assertion of Okoye [5] about the need for media organizations to create a platform where issues about Government actions are discussed, respondents were asked what programmes or publication type enlightened them the most about government activities. More than one-third of the respondents highlighted current affairs programmes to be the most enlightening when it relates to the activities of the government. Political interviews (29.1%) and current affairs (36.7%) are known to merely state the change in political office holders, the administrative activities of the President and other peripheral issues, *the main issues in context which are developmental or social in outlook are not given the best of media coverage and reportage*. Only 10.7% of the study population agreed that Social debates kept them most informed of government activities; this implies that information that matter to the lives and wellbeing of the citizenry are hardly reported, information that would leave the

citizens asking questions and demanding their rights are hardly ever see the light of day. The media are having a misplacement of values here: normatively, the media are not instruments to report government activities and the activities in the State House alone; rather, they are to link them up with what effect such activities will have on the lives of the millions out there (the greater good for the greater number).

B. Research Question 2: *To what extent do media messages inform citizens on their rights to demand greater accountability from the government?*

Building upon the affirmations of Okoye [5], media programmes are meant to empower media users to assess the extent to which the promises made during the electioneering season have been fulfilled through the provision of relevant, timely and sufficient information.

Table 2: Responses showing how well media programmes help respondents hold the government accountable for its promises

Response Category	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	20.9
Agree	37.2
Undecided	20.4
Strongly Disagree	14.8
Disagree	6.6
TOTAL	100.0 n=196

Table 3: Tabular representation of respondents' perception of media's fairness in reportage of government's activities

Response Category	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	13.8
Agree	36.7
Undecided	15.8
Strongly Disagree	17.3
Disagree	16.3
TOTAL	100.0 n=196

The survey respondents were asked if the information provided by the media thus far has helped in holding the government accountable for promises made. More than half of the respondents affirmed and 20% were undecided about the information provided by the media being capable of helping them hold the government accountable. This substantiates the reality that majority of citizenry are aware of the promises made by the successful candidates. If for any reason they have not raised any alarms as to the failure to measure up to promises made during the elections, other factors are at work, but as regards their knowledge that the government owes them the right to fulfill promises made. A larger percentage of the study respondents proved to be aware, owing to the information provided by the media on various platforms. Following the signing into law of the Freedom of Information Act, Udoakah [6] retorts that the press has been empowered to

freely comment on the activities of the government and political office holders especially in relation to accountability and responsiveness to the demands of the populace.

C. Research Question 3: *What is the perspective of Nigerians about the media's fairness in reporting government activities?*

The media are expected under their primary function to maintain a non-partisan stance in the reportage of political and governmental issues. Respondents were asked about the extent to which media reportage of government activities were perceived to be balanced. About half of the study respondents responded in the affirmative of the fairness and balance perceived in the reportage of government activities over the various media platforms.

On the other hand, however, a third of the population viewed the reportage of government activities to be biased, unfair or unbalanced in outlook. In tandem with the view held by Sobowale and Ekanem [1], these scholars agreed that there can be no expectation of national development with free expression and distribution of ideas, views and opinions. There is a need for media practitioners to understand that a balanced reportage of any activity including that of the government is necessary for aiding the citizenry in making better informed decisions.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper sought to assess the media's role in ensuring the accountability of the Nigerian Government. From the forgoing discussion, it was discovered that more than two-third of the sampled population believed that the media should report government activities. Furthermore, 74% of them confirmed to have seen a report or programme reporting government activities. Highlighted results thus beg the question: what kind of government activities are being reported, and on what programme or publication? It was discovered that less than one-third of the respondents (10.7%) stated that social debate programmes best enlightened them about government activities as compared to 36% of them who stated that they were best enlightened through current affairs. **Note, however, that social debates provide in-depth discussions on governmental activities when compared to current affairs that merely talk on societal demands and the need for the government to be held on the promise or promises it once made prior to assumption of office.**

VII. RECOMMENDATION

More than half of the survey respondents were yet to see any or some of the campaign promises actualized. Though this failure cannot be entirely blamed on the media, however, it is believed that adequate reportage should be given on the above mentioned subject. By so doing, it will stir up the consciousness of media users to the responsibility that the government in power owes electorate on the promise made whilst they sought the vote of the people. Similarly, Social debates programmes should be given more prominence if the media are to help the public to hold the government accountable. These avenues would open up the minds of citizens to the fact that there are those who make campaign promises and act otherwise when elected. In situations where government officials have fulfilled their promises, commendations should be given to them in the media; likewise, unfulfilled promises should be constantly mentioned in advertorials, documentaries, news reports, etc.

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