Anti-corruption in the Nigerian media

A case study analysis of media coverage on corruption and anti-corruption before and after the 2015 and 2019 general elections

Research Question

Does media coverage of corruption stories matter for policy-making and public attitudes? Sensationalised reporting of corruption stories can result in unmet public expectations of corruption prosecution and punishment. Meanwhile, truly investigative journalism that pursues unsavoury political truths is vital for society, yet the political settlements of most developing countries mean that established authorities are usually able to block such investigations. The result is fatigue by news consumers, who feel justice will not be served despite all the hype.

Key Findings

The media focus on anti-corruption and corruption, within the context of elections or change in government, does not necessarily affect policy-making with regard to anti-corruption. The voyeuristic and sensationalising tendency of news coverage has the effect of detracting from a pragmatic coverage of the developmental effects of corruption in Nigeria. A combination of hype and interested party agenda setting has led to both fatigue in terms of anti-corruption reportage and taken attention away from key issues of accountability.

Implications

SOAS ACE's approach suggests that if the media were to focus on areas where incremental change is possible, the spill-over effect on consumers would likely be more positive. Our feasible-yet-impactful approach to tackling corruption includes providing advice to journalists about the benefits of reporting 'low key' instances of anti-corruption as successes. Reporting in this way will not only give people tangible examples of how corruption is being tackled, but also help them understand the more complex task of exposing and rooting out large-scale systemic corruption.

Project Summary

This research will identify and audit the types of corruption and anti-corruption stories that were generated before and after the 2015 and 2019 elections.

The media audit process will aim to identify if patterns in reportage are influenced by elections, linked to particular political interests, to security issues and so on, and to investigate if there are any impacts on polling. The audit considers reportage of four key cases in the run up to the 2015 elections and how selected media houses responded to these through their reportage. The research will also identify how corruption is reported when there are major gender issues, for instance looking at the reportage of modern day slavery (especially through Benin City) as a case study.

Key research questions

- Why does anti-corruption media coverage matter?

- Given the media's focus on corruption, what is the direct impact of this on the behaviour of the state institutions, especially the executive arm of government?

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Methodology

Stage 1

Data collection consists of manual extraction of corruption stories from print newspapers archived in three libraries in Abuja and Lagos, plus extraction of online stories from news organisations' websites and Twitter.

Stage 2

Information gathering on all Executive Bills from the National Assembly, in order to compare coverage with political developments related to corruption and anti-corruption.

Stage 3

Consequence mapping analysis: superimposing the corruption/anti-corruption media coverage over the anti-corruption agenda of incoming political actors, especially through campaign promises or posturing and post-elections policy-making.

Policy and programming implications

This project is part of a cross-country set of projects on media where we want to understand better how corruption and anti-corruption is reported in the media, how effective this is, and whether this can be done better to achieve more effective anti-corruption results.

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