Setting the agenda or toeing the line? Corruption news coverage during Nigeria's elections

Photo Credit: Nigerian newspapers @naijatechguide 2018

Key messages

- Throughout Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 election cycles, the volume of corruption coverage peaked in the aftermath of party primaries and in the run-up to and during the voting period. The volume of coverage doubled from 2015 to 2019.

- However, increased volume, in terms of the number of news items published, did not lead to an increase in the *quality* of reporting, which remained primarily driven by news events and lacked contextual analysis. The voyeuristic tendency of corruption news coverage detracted from coverage of the institutional and developmental effects of corruption in Nigeria's executive system of government.

- Coverage of particular issues, and the way they are reported on, varied by newspaper depending on the political allegiance of senior editors or its core readership. On the whole, more independent online media outlets – such as *Premium Times* and *Sahara Reporters* – are more likely to publish investigative pieces than traditional print media.

- Media reporting on corruption has had limited impact on setting the anti-corruption agenda in the country. It is difficult to draw direct links between media reporting of corruption and actions taken by relevant government bodies.

What is ACE?

The Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research consortium takes an innovative approach to anti-corruption policy and practice. Working with a multi-country coalition of 12 partners over five years, ACE is responding to the serious challenges facing people and economies affected by corruption by generating evidence that makes anti-corruption real and using those findings to help policymakers, business and civil society adopt new, feasible, high-impact strategies to tackle corruption.

Anti-Corruption Evidence
SOAS University of London

www.ace.soas.ac.uk
@ACE_soas

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This briefing presents the findings of the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research consortium's media project focused on coverage of corruption-related stories during the 2015 and 2019 election cycles in Nigeria. The aim was to interrogate the nature of media reporting on corruption in terms of the issues covered, styles of reportage and political stances to ascertain the impact, if any, on anti-corruption efforts and policy takeaways. Based on our understanding of the political settlement of a 'typical' developing country – Nigeria included – our hypothesis was that truly independent reporting is difficult to implement as powerful political interests impede investigative and analytical journalism. Independent reporting does not mean that media organisations have to be neutral. Quite the opposite. It means that all parts of the political spectrum have the opportunity for their voices to be heard and, where necessary, are investigated in the media.

Introduction

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution states that '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 uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people'.[1] However, the engagement between Nigeria's media and the executive and legislative arms of government has not always been consistent with this envisioned role. Print media publications are prone to being pressured to report a certain story or to adopt a particular stance by influential political players. And even online media outlets that are focused on delivering investigative reporting are not immune to such pressure. In reality, reporting of corruption is generally driven by the issues and cases being discussed by prominent political figures on all sides.

Drawing on data collected from over 4,500 items of media reporting from four print and two online media outlets[2] across election cycles in 2015 and 2019, this briefing paper describes the intersection between corruption, the media and election processes in

Nigeria (Komolafe et al., 2019a and 2019b). The aim of the study was to better understand the types of corruption reporting that are prevalent in Nigeria and the issues that are scrutinised most often, and to propose ways in which this coverage could impact on policy-making or help set the public agenda on anti-corruption efforts. We also sought to understand the impact of corruption coverage on public opinion and policy outcomes by comparing it with the anti-corruption agenda of incoming political actors set out in campaign promises or posturing and post-election policy-making.

The media landscape in Nigeria: subject to patron-client politics

The establishment of a Presidential Advisory Committee Against Corruption, the improvement of the anti-corruption legal and policy framework in areas like public procurement and asset declaration, and the development of a national anti-corruption strategy have yet to yield the results President Buhari promised to deliver when seeking election to the Nigerian presidency in 2015. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) – the constitutionally mandated body tasked with fighting corruption in Nigeria – has been more active during Buhari's tenure, but it remains unable or unwilling to prosecute significant political and business actors across the political divide (Campbell, 2018). Selective enforcement is a characteristic of developing countries, and this extends to selective reporting in the media because politics is arranged around powerful patrons whose clients can include media owners.

Corruption in the media is anecdotally significant in Nigeria (Page, 2018). A 2013 study of 180 respondents from 18 media organisations found that 75% of respondents were willing to accept financial gifts for their work, with low salaries cited as a significant factor in their decision (Adeyemi, 2013). Above the lower-to-mid employee level, editors and publishers

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1   See chapter 2, para. 22 (http://www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionOfTheFederalRepublicOfNigeria.htm#Chapter_2).

2   *Daily Trust*, *ThisDay*, *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Premium Times* and *Sahara Reporters*.

often receive even bigger bribes to manipulate their coverage and quash stories that might embarrass their political patrons. Far from being an independent actor telling the story of corruption, Nigeria's media industry is part of the structural corruption that exists as a result of patron-client politics in this developing country. For instance, in 2015, publisher of *ThisDay* Nduka Obaigbena was identified as a recipient of the largesse handed out by former national security adviser Sambo Dasuki, who has been charged with the misappropriation of $1.9 billion.

The organisational structure of news outlets – especially in terms of media ownership – impedes the constitutional role of the media by determining the degree of editorial independence of a newspaper and hence the coverage of corruption stories. The recent arrests of journalists, including the founder of *Sahara Reporters* Omoyele Sowore, show the limits to freedom of expression (Human Rights Watch, 2018). So too, does the unwillingness to further investigate allegations of corruption involving ruling coalition members, such as Kano State Governor Abdullahi Umar Ganduje, who was seen making illegal exchanges of money in albeit poor-quality videos that circulated in October 2018, and who embarked on preventative court action as a warning to journalists looking to investigate further.

The potential reach – and influence – of news media in Nigeria

Print runs of only 100,000–150,000 copies may point to a lack of newspaper influence in a country which the Nigeria National Population Commission estimates is home to almost 200 million inhabitants (BBC News Pidgin, 2018). But this measure fails to capture the ways in which print newspapers are shared among individuals and families, the ways in which radio talk shows (still the most accessible source of news in many developing countries) broadcast daily programmes that debate media stories, and the role of the internet – both in terms of newspaper websites and also through social media platforms – in increasing citizens' access to news reports.

This growing (potential) role of the news media was apparent in the study – our two survey waves show that there were on average twice as many corruption stories published around the 2019 elections than in 2015 (191 per month versus 80 per month, respectively). However, the reporting continued to focus primarily on individual cases and accusations of corruption, not just across party lines but within parties too, particularly around the hotly contested party primaries. Substantial debates as to how corruption would be systematically addressed through reforms to the system were absent from the political campaigns. And this trend was reflected in media reporting, which did little to interrogate many of the statements made on the subject of corruption or to follow up on promises made by representatives elected in 2015 across the political spectrum.

Key findings

The Nigerian media continues to play a supplementary role in highlighting particular corruption scandals. Yet the descriptive reporting which characterises much of the corruption coverage published during the 2015 and 2019 election cycles leaves little space for analytical debate. Discussion of the systemic issues around anti-corruption reform and improvements to the accountability and transparency of government processes and structures is absent, which leaves politicians or individuals with standing in society able to shape coverage simply by making an accusation against an opponent or by commenting on high-profile cases.

Over three quarters of the corruption coverage analysed across the two election cycles can be categorised as news reportage, in that it simply reports claims and counter-claims about ongoing or possible corruption cases. In 2019, articles that discussed either the reform or performance of the EFCC comprised less than 1% of the total corruption coverage, which is indicative that investigative or more analytical reporting is lacking. While both *Premium Times* and *Sahara Reporters* profess to be investigative news outlets as part of their core mandate, they remain restricted by a lack of funds and the actions of a powerful network of politically connected individuals. Instead, what is clear, is that reports of corruption cases involving high-profile

individuals such as Diezani Alison-Madueke and former first lady Patience Jonathan are much more effective at selling newspapers than drawn out analyses of technical reform processes.

As a consequence of the descriptive and sensationalist reporting, the influence of news outlets in shaping the anti-corruption agenda has remained limited in Nigeria. Media coverage has failed to generate public interest or shape opinion towards ensuring accountability across all tiers of government. Whilst this is far from the sole responsibility of the media, news outlets such as those featured in this study could do more to hold elected officials to account for the campaign promises made to tackle corruption.

That is not to say that coverage of specific corruption cases is not important – but in order for it to be more impactful it needs to better situate cases within the wider development context in Nigeria. Income inequality is one of Nigeria's most serious but least talked about challenges, with Oxfam (2017) ranking Nigeria last out of 152 countries according to their commitment to reducing inequality. Proactive reporting on these sorts of issues, rather than journalism that is on the whole too responsive to happenings in an ongoing corruption case, is more likely to improve citizen awareness around why anti-corruption matters and garner popular support for effective reform.

Recommendations

- There may be scope for a media venture that is quality focused through investigative stories. The business model may be costly as it would need to rely on support from companies loyal to the brand rather than mass advertising, however this would be balanced with its target readership of a small but influential section of Nigerian stakeholders. An alternative model could be a crowd-funded online media news outlet that is beholden to people who are less politically connected.

- Social media platforms could be better utilised to increase the reach and influence of print media. This could entail the production of short audio clips in local languages to supplement written articles (to improve reach); infographics and pictures that illustrate the impacts of corruption (to improve awareness of impact); and more interactive surveys and polls on corruption issues (to improve citizen engagement).

- Agreement could be made to improve the basic pay for reporters, along with a cross-media pledge not to accept 'transport fees' for attending press conferences and announcements, which both increase the likelihood of political influence in shaping corruption coverage. This is a longer-term goal, therefore an interim step could be for media outlets to be encouraged to keep, and publicly share, monthly records of such facilitation payments.

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