

The Role of media in curbing corruption in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Qualitative, independent media reporting on corruption can play an important role in pressuring the government to act in the public interest. By drawing the attention to behaviour that is generally perceived as acceptable and exposing such behaviour as corrupt, media can raise public awareness; activate anti-corruption values; and generate outside pressure from the public against corruption [1]. The destructive impact of corruption upon nations throughout the world is acknowledged. Corruption is perhaps the most important factor that is impeding the accelerated socio-economic transformation of developing or Less Developing Countries (LDCs) of the world. In fact, it is recognized by development scholars that the level of reduction in corruption has a very direct link to the level of economic development of nations in the world [2]. The impact of media reporting on corruption can be “tangible” and “intangible. It is tangible when some sort of visible outcome can be 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 [3]. It is intangible when checks on 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 [4].

The media and civil society groups have been identified as important weapon to fight the scourge of corruption worldwide. How well media can perform the role of a watchdog on corruption, however, depends on a number of factors defined by the political, economic and legal environment in which media operate: media freedom of expression, access to information, ownership, competition, credibility and outreach are some of the key factors that have been identified as affecting the quality and effectiveness of media performance on corruption [5]. Officially, corruption has evolved from the petty to the grand, from occasional and uncommon phenomenon to an endemic, widespread and organized feature of society. Nigerians regard public office as the primary means to gain access to unlimited wealth. Public office opens the “widest avenue” for public officers to loot, embezzle, defraud, swindle, peculate, misappropriate, rob, cheat, thief and steal public resources with impunity. Arian asserts that corruption is Nigeria’s biggest single problem. It has not only weary public trust in government, but it has cost the government and the people of Nigeria poverty and underdevelopment. A report by Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission in 2005 revealed that the country’s successive governments stole and misused about 400 billion US dollars during the last four decades of the 20th century. Corruption in Nigeria led to squandering of the enormous resources available to the nation [6]. Media can play an important public accountability role by monitoring and investigating the actions of those who are granted public trust and who may be tempted to abuse their office for private

gain. In "The Media's Role in Curbing Corruption" Rick Stapenhurst provides a useful list of tangible and intangible effects that aggressive and independent journalism can have on corruption. This list provides a useful tool to assess the role and effectiveness of media as an instrument of public accountability in Uganda, which will be used throughout this paper [7].

Tangible effects are those that can be readily attributed to a particular news story or series of news stories, for example: the launching of investigations by the parliament or other authorities into allegations of corruption; the censure, impeachment, or forced resignation of corrupt politicians; the firing of public officers; the launching of judicial proceedings; the issuing of public recommendations by a watchdog body; the scrapping of a law or policy that creates an environment conducive or even contributing to corruption. Media coverage of corruption might also contribute to shape public hostility towards corrupt behaviour that might result in the electoral defeat of individual politicians or of an entire government and in public pressure to reform policies and laws that otherwise create the conditions for corrupt behaviour. News stories assessing the work and exposing flaws, weaknesses and even corruption in accountability institutions, such as courts, police and anti-corruption agencies, might lead to public pressure to reform these institutions. The by-products of all these actions might be to increase the costs of corrupt behaviour among public officials; to raise the standards of public accountability; to enhance the legitimacy of watchdog bodies and their independence from vested interests within the power structure that might otherwise interfere with their work; and to encourage witnesses of corruption to come forward. Media aggressive reporting on corruption might also prompt pre-emptive responses by authorities eager to protect their reputation and the public image of their institution before any allegation is aired [8].

More intangible and indirect effects of media reporting on corruption have to be seen in the context of the broader role that media plays in society,

particularly in contexts of weak political competition as in the case of Uganda and of many other African countries. In these contexts, aggressive and independent journalism acts as an indirect check on the sort of corruption that would otherwise flourish in the absence of political competition. By simply informing the public and presenting a variety of points of view media can promote public debate and enhance political and economic competition. Such competition might enhance accountability, open up alternatives to dealing with corrupt networks, and create incentives for political leaders to move against corruption. It might also encourage public participation and inform the debate by taking the lead in pressing for enhanced civil liberties such as freedom of expression. By disseminating knowledge about public decisions and procedures beyond a small elite group of decision-makers, media can also play a major role in undermining a precondition to corruption, which is the "shared knowledge" among a restricted circle of beneficiaries of corruption [9].

When consuming news media: buyers beware. Although a free and independent media is a key ingredient of democracy, this has never meant the media is unbiased. Most people know where on the political spectrum their chosen information source sits. In the UK, the Daily Mirror is a Labour paper; the Telegraph is Conservative. In the U.S. Fox News, despite its 'free and fair' tagline is known to be home to the (reactionary) right [10].

It's only when one particular bias stifles free speech or blurs the line between real news and sensationalism that the most important function of the fourth estate, holding those in power to account, is put in jeopardy. There are two scenarios where this can limit the media's watchdog role: when independent press is censored, as in a dictatorship, or powerful commercial interests muzzle criticism.

The radical transformation of the media landscape in the digital era has brought about a scenario where the latter scenario is beginning to undermine the purpose, if not the power, of a free press. With a drastic drop in sales of

print media, and an increasingly saturated market in which traditional journalism competes with less formal or professional reporting, media outlets are increasingly looking to alternative

Three Ways In Which Journalism Is At Risk From Corruption And What Can Be Done To Tackle Its Destructive Influence On Our News Media:

Media Ownership

The ownership of media outlets - whether state-run, privately owned, or public service broadcasters - is a crucial factor for the independence and integrity of the media. Where media companies are formally owned by the state, the government may exercise a strong influence, censoring stories, stifling investigations into high profile cases and generally compromising the neutrality of reporting. Privately owned media companies carry equally significant challenges as they can become beholden to certain public figures, individuals or corporate interests, who use them to promote a certain image of themselves, their opponents, or a certain issue or product. Concentrated ownership is most worrisome; where one or few individuals or firms own the majority of media companies in a country, heavily undermining neutrality and pluralism. Governments must create and enforce legal frameworks to promote transparency of ownership of the media through active disclosure of ownership structures to independent media regulators or authorities. This information should be available to the public in a clear and accessible way [12].

Some innovative initiatives are being piloted by journalists themselves, such as by Reporters without Borders in Colombia, whose database enables the public to examine the concentration of media ownership and related conflicts of interest by publishing and analysing data about media companies' holdings and beneficial owners. Austria is considered as an example of good practice in regulating media ownership. A 2011 Austrian media law permits anyone to look up the owners of print, broadcast and online media. Media companies are obliged to disclose the information directly to the public and report details of their owners, including information on all shareholdings,

ways to maintain market share and attention spans through the use of sensationalism and frantic news hunting [11].

beneficial owners and those with indirect interests and control [13].

Funding and Non-Transparent

Advertising

Financing models are closely connected to the issue of ownership. In both instances of public and private ownership, the media sector's growing reliance on non-traditional sources of revenue (i.e. not physical sales) makes it vulnerable to undue influence through new funding sources. Whether state subsidies or private contribution, media companies' reliance on funding streams tied to special interests is a real challenge to the integrity of their journalism. The growing recourse of media outlets to non-transparent advertising is an area of great concern. Searching for alternative revenue streams, many media companies enter into agreements with public relations agencies, government bodies or advertising companies to publish advertisements or promotional material disguised as editorials or other pieces of news [14].

In Macedonia and Serbia, the government is one of the largest advertisers, using taxpayer money in ways that can undermine media plurality by funding media outlets with a pro-government slant. To combat this, governments and relevant authorities such as media oversight bodies and tax offices must oblige media companies to disclose their financial information, especially regarding their sources of income.

Integrity of Journalists' Work

Besides no transparent advertising, corruption in the media sector can also be carried out by journalists, editors, and other actors. Lack of professional standards due to limited resources, low quality control, low salaries and technical capacity are likely to influence the ethical framework of media institutions. As the main stakeholders in this process, media companies have a central role in promoting media integrity. They should be the main

drivers of promoting integrity and transparency. There are a variety of ways they can do this. Media outlets can provide journalists and staff with adequate ethics and integrity training, and establish internal integrity systems with clear codes of conduct with policies regulating conflicts of interest, gifts and due diligence for advertising decisions. Sanctions for non-compliance and whistleblower protection policies can also help promote good practice. Ultimately, the sustainability of journalism, especially investigative journalism, rests upon a reputation for integrity, ethical conduct and credibility [15].

There is a general agreement among researchers and practitioners alike that the media has a pivotal role to play in strengthening processes of democratisation [16], quality of government, economic development and anti-corruption. The media can be broadly defined as the communication outlets used to deliver information to large audiences.

Regarding anti-corruption, the media offers a key route for information about governmental, administrative and business activities to be disseminated throughout society, and thus providing the public with a critical capacity to hold those in power accountable. By uncovering, exposing, informing and educating about the detrimental effects of corruption for society at large, the media can significantly increase the political risk of those exposed for their corrupt practices and foster the critical awareness of civil society.

A 2018 OECD study found that 2% of foreign bribery cases resulted from previous media reports on alleged corruption, which makes media reporting the most important source for public awareness and a paramount source of detection of corruption [17].

The capacity of the media to be an effective tool against corruption depends in great part on having a sufficient degree of media freedom. [18], defines media freedom as: i) the relative absence of governmental restraints on the media; ii) the total absence of governmental and other restraints; iii) the presence of conditions that ensure the dissemination of a plurality of ideas to a large audience.

Empirical research suggests a relationship between media freedom, media plurality and levels of corruption. The argument is that an independent and vigilant media constitutes an important channel of external control with a unique capacity to uncover transgressions by government and business officials. Independent journalists working in competitive and plural media markets have a strong incentive to uncover and expose stories of private and public sector corruption, which hinders the misuse of public resources because media reports increase the probability of being caught and punished for corrupt behaviour. Thus, the media helps to keep the political system transparent and accountable. Transparency is considered as a crucial factor in assessing the state of democracy around the world, which highlights the importance of a free press [16].

Due to the lack of transparency in government management and the existence of corruption in public office, citizens lose faith in the system and withdraw from their own civic responsibilities.

However, the positive correlation between media freedom and lower levels of corruption is not always that obvious. Comparing Ukraine and Belarus, notices that, despite a significantly higher degree of press freedom in Ukraine, the level of perceived corruption in both countries is the same. As there is no strict causality between media freedom and lower corruption levels, it remains difficult to pinpoint what exact mechanisms enable the media to be successful in curbing corruption [17].

Why does free media lead to lower levels of corruption in some cases and not in others? The answer to this question depends on different aspects. First is the need to distinguish between short- and long-term effects of the media on anti-corruption. Second is an understanding of the complex interrelation between the media and its "media ecosystem" understood as the multi-layered external circumstances under which the media can or cannot fulfil its potential in countering corruption. In addition, different types of media may have different effects on anti-corruption.

Before looking more closely at different media strengths and limitations, it is necessary to reflect on: i) the different functions of the media and their capacity to affect people's awareness and attitudes about corruption; and ii) the difficulties in assessing the media's direct impact when corruption stories have been exposed [18].

Three Functions of the Media

The media can play at least three main functions regarding corruption: to be watchdog of corruption, to promote integrity and to engage citizens in anti-corruption efforts. The watch dog function is founded on an understanding of the media as the "fourth pillar" of democracy within a system of checks and balances with the purpose to monitor and observe the behaviour of public officials in the legislature, executive and judiciary.

Most people's information about politics is acquired through mainstream media. Nevertheless, mainstream media's monopoly in forming public opinion is increasingly challenged and transformed by emerging forms of alternative media outlets in the internet. The multiplicity of sources of information provided on the internet also gives rise to multiple opinions. Emergent forms of journalism such as in the media, watchblogs, social media, civic or participatory journalism increasingly partake in the contested media field over political, economic and social influence. This diversity implies increasing opportunities to fulfil the media's potential as watchdog [7].

The media can unfold its role as watchdog against corruption through day-to-day monitoring of government performance or through investigating exposure of particular transgressions, which might pressure decision makers to take action (see, for example, the arrest of Angola's ex-president's son). By providing continuous oversight over individuals and institutions, the media can name and shame those representatives in public office who use their influence to hide instances of corruption or remain inactive when well-founded evidence about corruption is presented to them (see the 2018 protests against the Romanian government) [11].

Challenges for the media's watchdog include tight governmental control over the press (for example, in North Korea, Myanmar, Russia and China), the consolidation of media ownership and increasing market pressures (for instance, in the United States), vilification of critical reporting as "fake news" by political leaders, which threatens the public trust in journalism as an unbiased and fact-based source of information. Such challenges have become more accentuated over the past years as 2019 Freedom of the World data shows, indicating that in the past 13 years freedom of expression has progressively decreased [12].

In addition, the media's freedom is often hindered by inadequate legal frameworks. A 2010 study shows that fewer than 7.5% of African countries have an enforceable right to information law. For further research on this aspect, the Right2Info platform provides comprehensive information about the constitutional and legal framework for the right to access information and case studies from more than 80 countries.

The role of the media in promoting integrity has recently gained force, especially in response to the social disenchantment regarding governments' commitment to eradicate corruption. [7], observes in a number of emerging democracies in Africa, there is a deep-rooted civic cynicism with regards to the political process and the credibility of actors in the state, civil society and the media alike. Such civic cynicism promotes a normalisation of corruption in people's daily experience and thus stands as a major hindrance in attempts to counter corruption. Considering the importance of challenging such widespread attitudes of civic passivity and disenchantment in the face of corruption, approaches to promote integrity through campaigns involving the media can play an important role. By creating a national discourse in positive terms about the value of integrity, transparency and accountability, such campaigns can both educate about the effects of corruption and show that there is a viable alternative.

Efforts to promote integrity are present among different media genres, but appear to be particularly effective when they involve popular media such as

television channels reaching large audiences [8]. The integrity idol campaign, for example, has had a significant impact in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria. The objective of the campaign is to generate debates on the need and benefits of public integrity by rewarding honest government officials publicly on national television shows. Candidates are nominated by the public, and citizens can vote via their mobile phones in a safe and anonymous way, which helps to increase participation while empowering civil society to counter corruption [8].

The role of the media in engaging citizens in anti-corruption efforts has been favoured by new technologies and digitalisation. Various forms of participatory and civic journalism have emerged as a result of technical innovation, the rapid growth of the internet, networked journalism and the proliferation of skills with digital technology, which partly dissolve the separation between media consumer and producer. This might suggest a general “watchdog culture” in the making, which can strengthen traditional investigative media (see, for example, Mi Panamá Transparente) and leads traditional media to increasingly adopt more participatory formats.

Increasing numbers of citizens across the globe resume and complement the media’s work by setting alternative agendas, providing information and witness accounts from local perspectives, giving voice to marginalised groups and documenting transgressions by governments, businesses, and the traditional media. These emerging forms of alternative and citizen-based media are drastically changing the media landscape, patterns of distribution as well as the speed of circulation and global reach of information [9].

There is no clear-cut line between the different roles the media plays – monitoring, promoting civic values, engaging citizens to become active. All the described functions of the media can overlap or complement one another.

Assessing the media’s effects on anti-corruption

The impact of the media on anti-corruption can be long-term and short-term. There is a broad consensus among

researchers and practitioners alike about the long-term effects of the media on anti-corruption in relation to societal changes such as increased public awareness and citizens’ capacity of critical judgement, grown political participation, strengthened civic values and the shaping of public hostility towards corrupt behaviour. In the short-term, in some cases, critical media coverage of corruption cases have yielded immediate effects in countering corruption.

Professional ethics and skills

A high degree of integrity, professional skills and ethics is paramount for journalists in any media genre to effectively counteract corruption as well as to establish and maintain the necessary credibility in the eyes of the public. The more thorough, transparent, accurate, unbiased and credible the reporting on corruption is, the more effective the political pressure on those responsible can be. “Polemics masquerading as critical journalism” undermines the media’s credibility and, thus, their potential to curb corruption. This relates to a general criticism by the “media malaise” school, which claims that the increasingly fierce competition for audiences makes the media act increasingly as a “scandalmonger”, seeking rather to entertain and amuse than to inform and mobilise people for reform [10].

Moreover, contestations about the media’s credibility have become accentuated by the growing prevalence of concerted false information (“fake news”) via social media. The allegation of “fake news” not only serve to discredit accurate journalistic work but also serve as a pretext for restricting media freedom. The spread of fake news, both as a strategy of disinformation and a weaponised term to discredit critical journalism, poses serious concerns for anti-corruption activists, who strongly depend on the public’s trust in independent media.

Corruption in the media

The media has the potential to be an effective anti-corruption tool, but at the same time is itself at risk from corruption. The media can sometimes be continuously targeted by undue interference from vested interests, abuses of power and corruption. Being

the most important source of information for most people, the media represents an important channel of manipulating public opinion in favor of vested interests. Different media channels can be used to cover up instances of malfeasance, clientelism and embezzlement, among others. Thus, attempts to capture the media for personal benefits are risk in developing and developed countries alike. In extreme cases this might involve direct in-kind donations, extortion or cash for (non-)coverage to journalists and editors. Media capture can also take indirect forms through administrative and legislative regulations (for example licencing laws), which favor certain political or business interests. Placing hidden advertisement is another way to influence media reporting, which often results from the widespread collusion between journalists, public relations and advertisement agencies.

Fertile grounds for corruption may be created through lack of journalistic training and technical skills, low professional and ethical standards, financial pressures on media outlets and

individual journalists, which makes them susceptible to bribes, as well as ownership structures aligned with business interest. Under such circumstances, the media's role in fighting corruption can be significantly undermined and highlighted. Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer from 2013 found that in Australia, Egypt, New Zealand, United Kingdom the media was perceived as the most corrupt major institution, and as the second most corrupt institution in countries like Norway, Serbia, Sudan, Turkey, among others [12].

Media, anti-corruption and gender

There is no comprehensive research on the nexus between different media genres, anti-corruption and gender roles. Moreover, little is known about the gendered impact of media corruption. Without substantiated research about the specific linkages between different media genres, gender equality and anti-corruption remain largely based on assumptions that need further validation [13].

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