

Mass Media and the Fight Against Corruption in Nigeria: Power, Challenges, and Pathways to Reform

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Abstract

The mass media occupy a pivotal role in societal development and are widely recognized as the fourth estate of governance—an institutional force that participates in the processes of accountability and reform. In Nigeria, the persistent and systemic nature of corruption continues to undermine national progress, obstructing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and eroding public trust in democratic institutions. This paper explores the historical roots and socio-political entrenchment of corruption in Nigeria, the transformative potential of the mass media as a watchdog and agent of social change, and the structural challenges that limit media effectiveness. Through an examination of successful media-driven anti-corruption campaigns and investigative journalism initiatives, the study underscores the indispensable role of the press in promoting transparency, civic engagement, and ethical governance. It concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen the media's impact in fostering accountability and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Mass Media, Governance, Corruption, Transparency, Accountability, Nigeria

Introduction

Mass media refer to the various technological channels of communication designed to reach large, diverse, and heterogeneous audiences. They are widely recognized as central agents in societal development, a view grounded in their longstanding role as catalysts for change. This is reflected in the British tradition of recognizing the media as the "Fourth Estate of the Realm"—an institution with influence on governance akin to an order of political power (Obafemi, 1958).



In Nigeria, the 1999 Constitution guarantees press freedom and freedom of expression, allowing the media to operate with a significant degree of independence. Section 22 mandates 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.” Section 39 further asserts that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference” (1999 Constitution, as amended). These provisions empower the media to act as a watchdog, contributing to national development and responsible governance. Furthermore, Section 15(5) emphasizes that “the state shall abolish all corrupt practices and abuse of power.”

The social responsibility theory of the media obliges them to act in public interest, guided by values such as truthfulness, objectivity, accuracy, and balance. Likewise, development media theory encourages the media to support national goals and policies. While these principles are straightforward in theory, their application is shaped by political realities. The same media that promote transparency can, under certain pressures, perpetuate corruption.

There is no overstating the importance of mass media in combating corruption. Sustainable development is grounded in transparency, accountability, and good governance. In contrast, corruption erodes public institutions, misallocates resources, and undermines socioeconomic well-being. In Nigeria, widespread corruption has obstructed investment in essential sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and social services. It breeds inequality, poverty, and weak investor confidence, creating an unstable economic environment marked by arbitrary regulations and unfair competition.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2019), corruption stands as a major obstacle to Nigeria’s ambition to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly its aim to lift over 100 million citizens out of poverty. Approximately 63% of Nigerians are classified as multidimensionally poor due to poor access to education, healthcare, and adequate living conditions. Rural communities are disproportionately affected, with 72% of residents in poverty compared to 42% in urban areas.

Transparency International (2023) affirms that corruption erodes trust, weakens democracy, slows economic growth, and intensifies social inequality and environmental degradation. At one point, Nigeria was ranked the second most corrupt country globally—an indication of how deeply corruption has permeated public life and tainted the nation’s reputation. Although the federal government has proposed anti-corruption legislation, the real challenge lies in fostering a national consciousness where values rooted in integrity displace what is often referred to as the “Nigerian factor.”

The media have historically played a pivotal role in exposing corruption. Investigative journalism has uncovered significant scandals, including the Halliburton affair, oil subsidy frauds, pension fund mismanagement, and electoral irregularities. Although convictions are rare, media advocacy has fueled public discourse and mobilized reform efforts.



Nonetheless, challenges persist. Government-owned media often bow to political pressure, while privately owned outlets are sometimes compromised by their proprietors' political affiliations, economic and other external pressures. Despite these challenges, media remain critical allies in the national fight against corruption, complementing institutional efforts and civic reorientation campaigns.

This paper therefore examines the role of mass media in fighting corruption in Nigeria. It provides a historical overview, analyzes institutional and political barriers faced by the media, and presents case studies of successful anti-corruption media campaigns. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen media effectiveness in promoting transparency and accountability.

Historical Context of Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption has existed since antiquity, with ancient civilizations recording widespread abuse of power. In Nigeria, the phenomenon predates the nation's formation and remains notoriously difficult to define. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2000) describes corruption as the "*abuse of authority or trust for private benefits,*" a tendency found not only among public officials but also in private enterprises and nonprofit organizations. Similarly, the United Nations (2023) defines corruption as the "*abuse of entrusted power for private gain.*" Osoba (1996) defines it as "*anti-social behavior conferring improper benefits contrary to legal and moral norms, which undermines the authorities' capacity to secure the welfare of all citizens.*"

Justice Olayinka Ayoola, former chairman of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), identified bribery as once the most common form of corruption. Today, however, it has been overtaken by embezzlement, theft of public funds, extortion, favoritism, nepotism, and illegal political financing (cited in Owolabi, n.d). Corruption is so deeply entrenched in Nigeria that the phrase "*Nigerian factor*" has entered everyday parlance to describe it as a societal norm.

To combat corruption, Nigeria has created several institutions:

- **Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC)**
- **Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)**
- **Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB)**
- **Bureau of Public Procurement (BPP)**
- **Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI)**

These bodies aim to investigate, prosecute, and prevent corrupt practices by reviewing the operational systems of ministries and agencies (ICPC, 2023). Yet despite these efforts, Nigeria ranked 149 out of 180 countries in the Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index in 2021—evidence of persistent high-level corruption. According to Okunna (2001), corruption permeates virtually every aspect of Nigerian life, leading Osoba (2016) to argue that it is "*intelligible only in its social context.*"



Scholars trace corruption in Nigeria to the pre-colonial era, attributing it partly to traditional practices such as patronage networks and gift-giving (Adeyemi & Aderinto, 2015). The imposition of colonial rule disrupted indigenous systems. Justice Ayoola noted that colonialism, urbanization, and monetization contributed to personal enrichment among elites, while the colonial court system eroded traditional checks and balances. Anya (2022) controversially posits that the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria—conducted without popular consent—planted seeds of mistrust, disunity, and resentment that still fuel division today.

Colonial contractors introduced the *percentage profit* model, which fostered contract inflation, nepotism, and embezzlement (Anya, 2022). In the postcolonial era, national programmes such as Operation Feed the Nation and Green Revolution, along with the Land Use Act, were criticized for facilitating land grabs under the guise of food security, displacing many rightful landowners. Additionally, foreign loans were procured without visible developmental returns, deepening public suspicion.

Post-independence Nigeria witnessed the emergence of corrupt political elites. During the First Republic (1960–1966), practices such as vote buying, political thuggery, electoral fraud, and even assassination were common (Owolabi, n.d.). The oil boom of the 1970s further exacerbated the problem: wealth was misappropriated, and transparency diminished significantly (Agbibo, 2016).

Decades of military rule entrenched a culture of impunity. Leaders enriched themselves while dismantling accountability systems (Adamolekun, 2001). The return to civilian rule in the late 1990s did little to reverse these trends. According to Oyelami (2005), systemic corruption continued as new political elites recycled old habits. For instance, the administration of President Shagari ended with ballooning external debt, while elite insiders secretly transferred wealth to foreign accounts. Although the Obasanjo government made attempts at reform, entrenched practices like kickbacks on public projects (often 10% to 25%) remained deeply rooted. Today, corruption takes many forms—bribery, favoritism, extortion, and gratification. The devastating consequences make anti-corruption efforts not only urgent but essential to Nigeria’s progress and development.

The Cost of Corruption in Nigeria

The cost of corruption in Nigeria is staggering and largely unquantifiable. Among its most tragic attributes is its contagious nature, spreading like wildfire during harmattan, permeating institutions and weakening the fabric of governance. Corruption has persistently thwarted the Nigerian government's ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other national priorities. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, n.d.) notes that corruption hampers the achievement of all the SDGs by prioritizing the selfish interests of a few over the welfare of the majority. In environments plagued by weak state capacity, efforts to eradicate poverty, combat hunger, provide quality healthcare and education, or ensure gender equality often fall short. Particularly relevant is Goal 16, which seeks to “*promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and*



inclusive institutions at all levels.” Corruption undermines this goal and others, fueling conflict, destabilizing societies, and eroding the rule of law.

According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2023), Nigeria’s economic losses due to corruption could be devastating if unaddressed. They estimate that by 2030, corruption could cost the country up to 37% of its GDP—approximately \$2,000 per citizen. Resistance to regulatory reform by self-serving officials entrenches inefficiencies, perpetuates bribery, and fosters misallocation of public funds, exacerbating poverty and underdevelopment. Justice Ayoola, as cited in Owolabi (n.d.), offers a compelling summary of the toll corruption takes:

“In economic and moral terms, corruption is very costly. It undermines confidence in the government, whose moral authority is diminished. It worsens income inequality and poverty, as those who benefit from kickbacks and preferential deals are seldom among the poor. Corruption acts as an additional tax on enterprises, raises costs, and reduces incentives to invest. It burdens small and medium-sized enterprises, shifts spending away from socially beneficial projects toward low-value ‘white elephant’ initiatives and deters both foreign and domestic investment. Ultimately, it discourages donor aid and stifles economic growth.”

These consequences illustrate why development remains elusive wherever corruption is endemic. It distorts national priorities and weakens every engine of progress.

Because corruption is a systemic failure, it demands a robust, strategic response—particularly through legal reforms, regulatory enforcement, and civic reorientation. The mass media, as agents of public accountability and enlightenment, play an indispensable role. Their power to inform, expose, and shape collective consciousness makes them vital allies in the fight against corruption. It is, indeed, a partnership: it takes two to tango.

Media Power in Combating Corruption

Mass media serve as critical agents of change. Lasswell (1948) outlined their core societal functions: surveillance of the environment, correlation of societal segments in response to events, and the transmission of cultural values. Tosanwumi (1994) further emphasized their roles in educating, informing, and entertaining the public. Beyond these functions, the media mobilize society, shape public discourse, and drive civic engagement. Their relevance lies in their capacity to foster public awareness through investigative and interpretative journalism, advocacy, and agenda-setting. In the fight against corruption, objective and factual reportage remains the media’s most potent weapon.

The watchdog role of the media enables them to set the public agenda. Through *investigative journalism*, they uncover concealed information of public interest, while *interpretative journalism* connects such revelations to their broader consequences. These approaches can expose corrupt acts by public officials, political figures, and corporate leaders, compelling accountability and triggering legal and policy responses.

Olowu and Kamal (2017) contend that the media have been vital in promoting transparency and accountability. Using opinion pieces, editorials, and advocacy campaigns, they have spotlighted the corrosive effects of corruption on national development. Media organizations elevate public discourse, nurturing a culture in which citizens demand integrity from public officeholders. Editorial and analytical reporting not only inform but also empower the public to participate meaningfully in civic life, especially where access to formal education is limited. According to the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP, 2018),

“To officially hold information and comment on the affairs of state and conduct of government is an intrinsic part of democracy, which demands accountability of rulers and public officials to the citizenry.”

The Nigerian mass media have significantly influenced the country’s anti-corruption landscape. Through the exposure of scandals such as the fuel subsidy scam and the missing oil revenue controversy, media investigations have illuminated systemic rot and inspired public demand for change. Their work has led to parliamentary debates, judicial inquiries, and civil society mobilization.

Moreover, the media have consistently served as watchdogs—scrutinizing public institutions and highlighting corrupt practices via critical reporting and editorial analysis. Their efforts often produce public pressure, spurring governmental action and reforms. These platforms have also educated citizens about their rights and responsibilities, encouraging civic engagement and amplifying voices that call for transparency and justice.

Importantly, the media have driven calls for legal and policy reforms, advocating stronger anti-corruption legislation, independent oversight bodies, and transparent governance. These contributions have shaped public discourse and influenced Nigeria’s legislative and regulatory environment.

The role of the media extends further, as noted by Okafor and Adejumo (2018). They provide a voice for whistleblowers and anti-corruption activists, enabling the exposure of wrongdoing and mobilizing grassroots support for change. However, citizen participation remains hindered by systemic barriers. According to the NBS (2019):

- Only 19% of Nigerians refused to pay bribes when asked up slightly from 16% in 2016.
- 48% of those who refused experienced negative consequences.
- Just 3.6% of citizens who paid a bribe reported it to an official institution.
- Many believed that reporting was futile:
 - 36% said bribery was too common to bother reporting.
 - 29% believed no one would care even if they did.

These statistics underscore a prevailing culture of impunity and mistrust in institutional processes.



In conclusion, the mass media remain a pivotal force in Nigeria's fight against corruption. By exposing malfeasance, holding public officials to account, and advocating for reform, they lay the groundwork for transparency and good governance. However, to unlock their full potential, challenges such as ownership bias, censorship, and limited media literacy must be addressed. Still, their role as society's mirror and conscience cannot be overstated—they are an indispensable partner in building a corruption-resistant Nigeria.

Challenges Faced by the Mass Media in Fighting Corruption

The mass media, in theory, understand their obligations to society—designing audience-centered programming while responding to public attitudes and expectations. This symbiotic relationship between media and society is underpinned by the libertarian theory of the press, which justifies the media's right to operate freely. Yet, despite their civic commitment, media practitioners are often met with hostility, suppression, and even violence.

Omowunmi (2016) observes that journalists in Nigeria regularly face threats, intimidation, and legal constraints when reporting on corruption. Resource constraints, legal pressures, and safety concerns often limit the media's ability to pursue stories, leading to self-censorship and hesitance in challenging powerful actors.

The brutalization of press freedom has deep historical roots. The military government of the Buhari–Idiagbon regime introduced *Decree No. 2*, which sanctioned the detention of journalists without trial. The murder of Dele Giwa via a letter bomb in 1986 remains a chilling reminder of the dangers faced by those who speak truth to power. Similarly, *Tell Magazine* endured intense persecution during the Abacha years, adapting a nomadic publishing strategy to survive while remaining committed to justice and public enlightenment.

According to the Institute for Global Change (IGC, 2023), Nigeria has witnessed a pattern of violence against journalists, including physical assaults, arson attacks on media houses, and politically motivated sanctions. The International Press Centre (IPC) and the Media Foundation for West Africa reported that no perpetrators were brought to justice. Notable incidents include the assault of *CrossRiverWatch* journalist Jonathan Ugbal and the arrest of *Punch* newspaper's Gbenga Oloniran—both emblematic of a broader climate of impunity.

Investigative journalists who focus on corruption-related stories operate in particularly hostile environments. Though sections 22 and 39 of the 1999 Constitution, as well as Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, guarantee freedom of expression, these protections are often violated in practice. A 2023 report by *Reporters Without Borders* ranks Nigeria among West Africa's most dangerous and difficult countries for journalism (Victor, 2023).

Compounding these challenges is the rise of fake news and misinformation. According to Obiezu (2023), unscrupulous actors exploit public sentiment to spread falsehoods—undermining credible



journalism. A significant portion of the population, including digitally inexperienced or illiterate audiences, may fall prey to such disinformation, complicating the public's ability to distinguish fact from fabrication.

Ethnicity and politicization also hinder media credibility and unity. Eribo (1977) noted that Nigeria's ethnic fragmentation—250 ethnic groups, 400 languages—has bred parochialism in media ownership and content. At independence, various regional interests used media outlets to promote sectional agendas, sometimes at the expense of national cohesion. Journalistic professionalism was compromised, and stories were often framed through ethnocentric lenses.

Media ownership, especially during military rule, has further contributed to this crisis. Government-owned outlets were often subdued under censorship, while private media struggled to maintain autonomy. Even today, political systems in Nigeria remain hostile to press freedom, with censorship, intimidation, and threats often deployed to curtail dissent. The list of victims—Dele Giwa, Tunde Thompson, Nduka Irabor, Nosa Igiebor, Segun Osoba, Anthony Enahoro—underscores the persistent sacrifice demanded of Nigeria's free press.

Additionally, the "brown envelope" syndrome—the practice of accepting bribes for favorable coverage—threatens journalistic integrity. Many editorials lack merit, tainted by inducements that obscure truth and weaken the media's watchdog role. Despite these challenges, media successful campaigns against corruption are worth mentioning.

Successful Mass Media Campaigns Against Corruption in Nigeria

Several impactful media campaigns have demonstrated the potential of journalism and advocacy to challenge entrenched corruption in Nigeria.

One notable example is the "**Eyes on Corruption**" campaign, launched by the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) in partnership with Transparency International. This initiative leveraged a mix of television, radio, and social media platforms to raise public awareness about the damaging effects of corruption. It also empowered citizens with reporting tools and resources to identify and expose corrupt practices. The campaign sparked wider public scrutiny and accountability among public officials.

Another significant initiative is the "**Say No Campaign**", spearheaded by the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP). This campaign utilized social media engagement, public demonstrations, and grassroots advocacy to educate citizens about their civic rights and the societal costs of corruption. Its emphasis on empowerment and collective action helped build momentum for anti-corruption reforms and policy change.

The Nigerian media have also excelled in using investigative reporting to expose high-level corruption. For instance, extensive media coverage of the **2012 fuel subsidy scam** revealed inflated subsidy claims, embezzlement, and collusion between government officials and oil marketers. This

triggered nationwide protests, compelled government-led investigations, and led to criminal prosecutions and policy reforms in the subsidy regime.

Similarly, the 2014 "Missing Oil Revenue" scandal was exposed through persistent media investigations and audit reports. Journalists uncovered major discrepancies in reported oil earnings and highlighted systemic opacity in the oil sector. Public pressure, fueled by media coverage, forced the government to initiate inquiries and consider reforms in oil revenue management.

These campaigns and investigative efforts exemplify the media's crucial role in fostering public awareness, promoting government accountability, and driving institutional reform in Nigeria.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Impact of the Media on Anti-Corruption Efforts

To enhance the effectiveness of the Nigerian media in combating corruption, the following strategies are recommended:

1. Enabling Legal Frameworks:

The government should create a regulatory environment that protects media freedom and shields journalists from harassment, censorship, and violence. Laws promoting transparency in media ownership and funding are essential to safeguard editorial independence.

2. Capacity Building in Investigative Journalism:

Media institutions should invest in training and resources that empower journalists to pursue corruption-related investigations with professionalism and resilience.

3. Improved Access to Information:

Government agencies must implement and uphold Freedom of Information laws, ensuring timely, unrestricted access to public records for journalistic scrutiny.

4. Partnerships with Civil Society:

Collaboration between media organizations and civil society groups can amplify advocacy, enhance research quality, and mobilize grassroots action.

5. Whistleblower Protections:

Strengthening legal safeguards for whistleblowers will encourage the exposure of corruption by insiders, providing journalists with leads and ensuring informants' safety.

6. Public Education and Media Literacy:

Campaigns to promote critical thinking and fact-checking among citizens can help counter misinformation and empower them to demand ethical governance.

7. Transparency in Media Operations:

Media houses should disclose ownership and funding sources to build public trust and avoid conflicts of interest that could compromise reporting integrity.



8. **Data Journalism and Digital Tools:**

By embracing data visualization, digital storytelling, and AI-assisted analysis, media organizations can more effectively communicate complex corruption cases to broader audiences.

With these measures in place, Nigerian media can continue to serve as a powerful engine for accountability, transparency, and national progress.

Conclusion

Corruption remains one of the most formidable barriers to Nigeria's development, crippling institutions, eroding public trust, and undermining the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, amidst these challenges, the mass media have emerged as a vital force for truth, accountability, and reform. This paper has traced the deep historical roots of corruption in Nigeria and examined the transformative role of the media in confronting this endemic problem—through investigative journalism, public advocacy, and civic mobilization.

Despite formidable obstacles—ranging from censorship and threats to limited resources and systemic bias—the media continue to shine a spotlight on malfeasance and empower citizens to demand transparency. Successful campaigns like *Eyes on Corruption*, *Say No*, and landmark reportage on scandals like the subsidy scam affirm the media's potential to shape public discourse and catalyze institutional change.

For Nigeria to chart a course toward ethical governance and sustainable development, the media must be protected, empowered, and integrated into the national anti-corruption architecture. Strengthening press freedom, enhancing journalistic capacity, and encouraging active civic participation are not just recommendations, they are imperatives. When the media thrive, democracy is enriched, corruption is challenged, and progress becomes possible.

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