

FRAMING CHINA'S ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN IN FOREIGN MEDIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE EDITIONS OF LEADING NIGERIAN AND U.S. NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT: *China's rapid economic growth has come with it the good and the bad. As the country's economy blossoms, so does the desire of the elite to acquire more wealth and power. Corruption offers a route towards realizing that ambition. But the Xi Jinping administration has branded its anti corruption efforts as catching the 'tigers and flies', indicative of an all-inclusive anti-corruption war with ramifications for China's political and economic partners Nigeria and the U.S. inclusive. This study examines how the online editions of some leading newspapers in Nigeria and U.S. have framed this campaign. The Washington D.C and Beijing are economic rivals, as such major events in Beijing reverberate in Washington and vice versa. Nigeria is one of China's leading trading partners in Africa. China's political actions have implications for Nigeria's economic partners in Africa. Using content analysis our study shows that the studied newspapers view the campaign from opposing perspectives.*

KEYWORDS: Anti-graft, Nigerian media, U.S media

INTRODUCTION

Corruption has received enormous attention from scholars, politicians, the elite and the commoners alike. Even those who engage in it despise in public. Many scholars have linked the poor economic and political development of many countries to corruption. To such scholars, where corruption thrives, poverty, underdevelopment and diseases reign.

China's opening up policy which came into effect in 1978, according to He (2000) though made huge contribution to the country's economic growth, it also has played a major role in the spread of corruption in the country. The more prosperous the nation became, the more people sought legal and illegal avenues to be part of the emerging superrich class. He said the menace grew from the known official definition of using public authority and resources for private interests, to include other negative phenomena and unhealthy tendencies with Communist Party of China (CPC) and government departments.

Conscious of the damage corruption can do to the socio-economic of the evolving China, President Xi Jinping since assumption of office in 2012 promised to remedy the situation. Xi apparently drew inspiration from the State Council.

In a White Paper on China's Efforts to Combat Corruption and Build a Clean Government issued in 2010 Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China,

while acknowledging that corruption remained a socio-historical phenomenon of great concern, affirmed CPC and Chinese government's stance to build a clean government.

At the 18th CPC national convention in 2012, Xi became the Secretary-General of the party and officially the leader of the party. He vowed to build his blueprint for China on what Zhou (2016) described as the 'China dream', with anti-corruption drive the roadmap to achieving that goal.

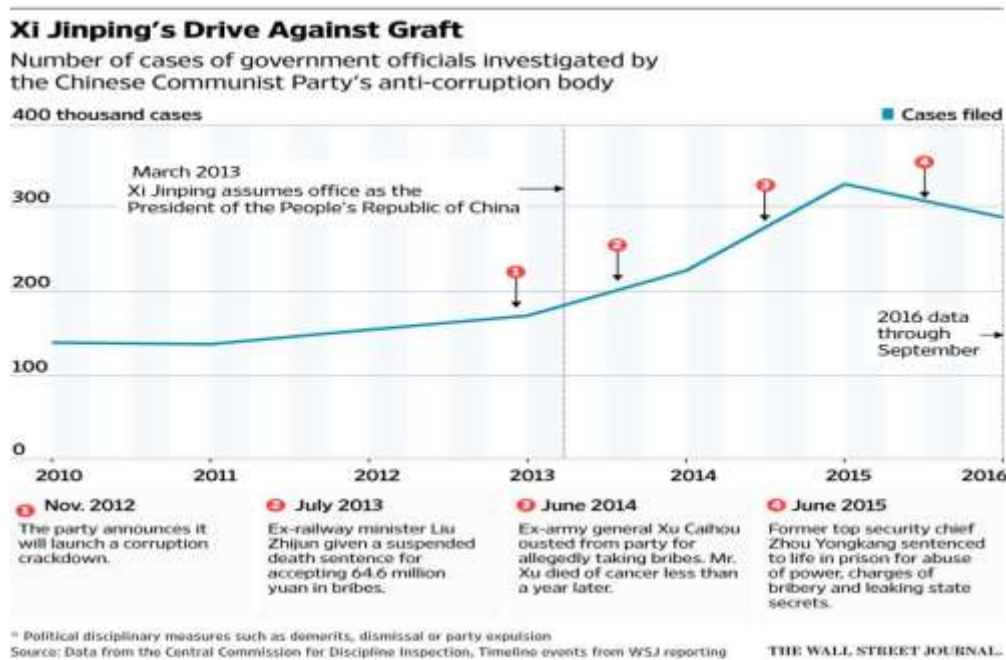


Figure 1. shows the number of government officials investigated, 2010-2016.

Source: Wall Street Journal

To address, these challenges and give impetus to the war, Xinhua, Chinese government-run news agency, reported that in March 2018, the country's legislature passed the Supervision Law which confers 'extremely broad' investigative powers on a new anti-corruption agency, the National Supervision Commission, otherwise known as NSC. According to the report, the Supervision Law will allow the NSC to centralize various supervisory and anti-corruption duties hitherto discharged by different government agencies and the CPC. The scope of the investigation for the new anti-corruption Caesar will cover even non-CPC members.

Though it is difficult to have a common definition of corruption, Chu et al (2015) provide a clue of what could be relatively acceptable to many as a working definition of the malaise. According to them, corruption refers to the occurrence of illegitimate actions. Although bribe taking and giving are the fulcrum of corruption, this definition broadens the horizon, rejecting the temptation of confined corruption to the duo.

Tariq (2005) shades more light as he explains that 'corruption takes place when public officials break the law in pursuit of their private interests', contrary to public good. Adenike (2013)

argues that corruption remains an international problem that has plagued many countries. Citing the World Bank, she said corruptions remained the greatest obstacle to development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have done studies on corruption in China it is doubtful if any has compared the media coverage of the campaign by the media of two different countries. In his *Anti-Corruption Efforts and Public Opinion in China: Evidence from a National Experiment in an Autocratic Regime*, Nan (2015) found that while anti-corruption advocates frequently call for greater transparency in the fight against corruption, a growing literature has suggested that such reforms might have negative consequences on public sentiment. According to him, although anti-corruption efforts seem to convince the citizens that the war is being won by highlighting that highly placed offenders were being punished, the reality on ground indicates that the citizenry have a contrary opinion about the war.

Similarly, Kazuko (2015) in his study, *The power structure under the leadership of Xi Jinping* inferred that since assuming office, eliminating graft has been the top priority of the government. While many scholars admit that more need to be done, they argue that Xi has gone a long way in restoring public confidence in the country's leadership. Charles (2017) in *'China vs. Itself: The Perpetual War Against Corruption'* found that the current anti-corruption campaign, in spite of its challenges, remains more prolonged and far-reaching than skeptics had envisaged.

But not all scholars are excited. Some of them have argued that for it to succeed and the international media buy into it, it has to be institutionalized and less projected as a personal fight between Xi and his 'political enemies'. In deed this perception has been one of the drawbacks of the campaign, in spite of the 'tigers' and 'flies' that have been punished. Fewsmith (n.d) argues that the campaign appears to focus on strengthening Beijing's political hold over the provinces by dispatching officials to run such provinces when their local leaders are caught in the web of corruption.

Zhao (2016) in a study entitled *'The ideological campaigns in Xi's China building regime legacy,'* stated that the campaigns were driven more by regime survival than the desire that rig changes. He cited sentiment against the party and government due to staggering pollution, corruption and growing income inequality as indicative of the political undertones of the campaign. Fabre (2017) posits anti-graft war would remain a pipe dream if Xi sticks to current strategy. 'Xi has not only failed to assemble a social coalition against fraud but has already alienated the country's intellectuals with his stronghold on political control, ideological influence over the academy, the web and media censorship' he says.

Theoretical framework

The Nigerian and U.S. publics' perception of the war against graft in China is largely dependent on the way it is framed and presented to them by the media. The news media serve as the conduit through which individuals learn about issues outside their immediate space Moy et al (2016). Consequently, they say, the news media influence people's attitudes, cognition and behaviors, spanning across spectrums such as countries, culture, age, gender, elitism, among others. This study is therefore underpinned in the framing flank of media effect theories.

Media effect theories can be traced to the 19th century when Harold Lasswell produced his hypodermic and magic bullet effect theory. The theory aims to project the effect the media can have on people's understanding of issues through the manner they are delivered. Maxwell

and Donald (1972) argue that what our knowledge about the world is largely a reflection of what we glean from the news media about the world is based largely what the news media.

Denis and Druckman (2007) define media frame, in communication as words, images, phrases and representations that a speaker uses when relaying an information about an issue or an event to the audience. Within the sphere of media communication, therefore, frame can be said to imply the manner in which the journalist utilizes the above-listed representations in relaying his news to his audience. This action by the journalist goes a long way in shaping the manner in which the public or a member of the audience receives, process and understand news reports. As Hallahan (1999) puts it, framing is a critical activity in the construction of social reality as it contributes in shaping the perspective through which people see the world.

According to Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) framing is basically about how an issue is characterized in news reports influences the manner in which it is understood by the recipient. As observed by Xiufang and Neran (2009), Framing also offers us, the ability, albeit, methodologically, to connect the study of perceived and portrayed national images.

Given the role of framing in processing by the journalist on one hand and reception and comprehension by the members of the audience on the other hand, the journalist always pays special attention to this agenda-setting sub-genre. Ardevol-Abreu (2015) posits that framing is not only ever present in the mind of the journalist but also in the news report that he writes and delivers.

The mood of the journalist, his understanding of the event being reported upon, in other words, his sentiments play a key role in the manner news stories he is pushing out to the public is framed. Monk (2012) alluded to this when she argued that a journalist does not just decide what information to select or exclude from his presentation of a news story but makes a conscious effort in making his choices. How the journalist frames his message is a reflection of his predispositions.. Citing Entmann (1991:7), Monk contends that news frames are embodied not in overt evaluative statements, but in key words, metaphors, concepts and symbols visual images emphasized in a news narrative by its writer.

METHODOLOGY/SCOPE OF STUDY

In this study, we analyzed the headlines and texts of stories, articles or opinions carried by the selected media on China's anti-corruption war. From the U.S. we selected the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. From Nigeria, we selected *Leadership*, *The Punch* and *The Nation*; six newspapers in all. We based the selection on the newspapers' high circulation rate, target audience. All the newspapers are known for their rich political and economic contents and are widely read. Our interest centered on how they framed their reports on China's anti-corruption campaign. We created three pairs, juxtapositioning two papers from the two countries as we analyzed their headlines and texts.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the selected media framed China's anti-corruption crusade under President Xi Jinping. This study seeks to establish if these leading media, going by their framing of the campaign perceive it as genuine effort to curb corruption in China or as a political rhetoric by the Xi administration. Against the background of media

effect theories, public opinion and perception of governments, understanding the selected major media's approach to the coverage of the campaign will provide a lead into the public's perception of the campaign in the two nations.

Significance of Study

While the Chinese media have positively reported Xi administration's anti-corruption crusade, not much has been done by media and communication scholars to investigate how this campaign is framed and reported by the international media. This study seeks to fill that vacuum by providing an insight media's understanding, framing and delivery of the campaign to their audiences. Its uniqueness also lies in juxtaposing the selected media from the two countries to get a clearer understanding for their framing of the subject. This approach differs from similar studies in the past which restricted their investigations on similar subjects to media selected from same environment.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

Washington Post versus The Punch: In their coverage of China's anti-corruption war, both newspapers applied different approaches in framing their endorsement or otherwise of the campaign and in rare cases, their aloofness.

Washington Post: On March 19, 2018, the *Washington Post* while reporting the China's new anti-corruption agency, the National Supervision Commission had the headline: 'China's leader tightens grip with new anti-corruption agency', indicating that reason behind the new agency is to strengthen Xi's stay in power. Citing 'experts' in the body of the report, the paper claimed the new agency extends Xi's control and significantly undermines rule of law and civil rights.



Figure 2 Shows the *Washington Post*, March 19, 2018 edition, headline indicating the political undertones of Xi's anti corruption campaign

Similarly, in its Nov. 11, 2017 the newspaper had this headline” ‘China’s all-powerful leader should heed the lesson from history, former official says’. This is the headline of an interview granted by a former senior official of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Bao Tong in which he discussed the anti-corruption issues in China. It is emphatic that Xi is ‘all powerful’; and his anti-corruption drive is ‘a selective campaign’.

The election of Wang Qishan as the Vice President during the last Congress of the CPC was also an opportunity for *Washington Post* took take another veiled jab at Xi’s anti-corruption efforts. On March 17, 2018 in a story under the headline: “China’s Xi gets right-hand man, ‘loyal firefighter’ elected vice president’. It is obvious, even to the most naïve that every presidential candidate chooses his right-hand man as his running mate of vice. In the body of the story, the newspaper recalled how Wang arrested several people seen as disloyal to the president when he was the anti-corruption agency chief.

In its Oct.18, 2017 edition the same newspaper ran a headline: Xi Jinping at China congress (CPC Congress) calls on party to tighten its grip on the country. Although the story is expected to be about power control the story the claims the anti-corruption campaign is used to ‘take down’ factional rivals... rather than eliminating graft.

The Punch: Our analysis revealed that while the stories in the *Washington Post* are framed to portray Xi as having an ulterior motive disguised as an anti-corruption crusade, *The Punch* sees things differently. In an editorial published on Oct. 20, 2017, under the headline: ‘Nigeria’s giant struggle’ the newspaper gave its approval of Chinese government’s tough stance on corruption and meting out severe punishment on those found guilty and urged Nigeria to adopt the ‘China approach’. The newspaper went as far as recommending death penalty for those convicted of corruption as is the case under some circumstances in China.

In a related report on ‘Punishing conniving banks, officials,’ *The Punch* praised China for its hard stance on sanitizing its banking system by harshly punishing erring banking officials. This harsh stance, the report says, has brought sanity and stability to the industry, something rare in Nigeria where insolvency is common among banks. The report published on Oct. 4, 2017 did not seek the Chinese government’s efforts at sanitizing the banking sector as a move to cripple Xi’s opponents financially.



Figure 3 show a headline an October 19, 2017 edition of *The Punch* Newspaper indicating that China’s anti-corruption drive does not respect status

In a related report published on Oct.19, 2017, under the headline: ‘China investigates 440 senior officials over corruption’, *The Punch*, merely reported the investigation of the officials without framing the headline to indicate a political witch-hunt, or an attempt to explain o its readers, the political undertones behind the arrests and investigation.

***New York Times* Versus *The Nation*:** Our findings indicate that the partner seen between the *Washington Post* and *The Punch* are not different from what is presented in the *New York Times* and *The Nation* newspapers. Both newspapers take extreme positions in their views and comments on the subject under investigation.

***New York Times*:** On Nov. 29, 2017, *New York Times* went to town with a screaming headline: ‘In China, fears that the new anticorruption agency will be above the law’ as the Chinese authorities put finishing touches to the National Supervisory Commission Law’. As we found in *Washington Post*, *New York Times* says that the proposed agency will have ‘sweeping powers’, adding that ‘during his first term, Mr. Xi waged a far-reaching campaign against graft, using it to impression rivals, instill fear within the party establishments and set himself up as the nation’s most powerful leader in decades’.



Figure 4 shows a *New York Times* headline of Nov 29, 2017 invoking fear and implying abuse of law in the China’s anti-corruption fight

In a related headline dripping with fear and hoax, the newspaper on Feb.28, 2018 screamed: “Xi sets China on collision course with History”. The report is about the major political and social changes in China under Xi. ‘Mr. Xi has also led sweeping anti-corruption campaigns that have disproportionately purged members of rival political factions, strengthening himself but undermining China’s consensus-driven approach’, the report reads in part. The emphasis here, seems placed on the target of the campaign rather than its success or failure.

On March 20, 2018 the newspaper carried another report entitled ‘What the west doesn’t get about Xi Jinping. The report described the anti-corruption campaign as a political warfare rather and a social need. ‘His (Xi’s) anti-corruption campaign has been a master class in political warfare; since 2013 he has used it to clean up the party, clean out any potential challengers and insert his loyalists into broad swaths of the government, with himself at the top’, it reads in part.

The *New York Times* in another publication on Feb. 7, 2017 appear to have further strengthened the witch-haunt narrative going by the manner it framed and delivered a story. captioned: ‘Corruption Inquiry Draws Nearer to former Chinese Prime Minister’. The subject of the story is not a suspect, as framed by *New York Times*, but ‘a wealthy investor who went into business with relatives of previous prime minster’. The newspaper would also want its

readers to believe that the move is a sign that Xi's anticorruption campaign 'maybe closing in on a former top leader'.

The Nation:

The manner of the framing of the campaign in *The Nation* follows the same pattern as in *The Punch*. For instance, why deploring the manner in which corrupt government officials have gone unpunished in Nigeria, a January 23, 2018 publication in *The Nation* said a harsher punishment such as a death penalty, as seen in China would have served a deterrent to many public office holders who harbor corruption tendencies.

The Nigerian Judiciary Council was recently embroiled in a corruption scandal. Many Nigerians, including those *The Nation* newspapers felt the corruption in the judiciary is a reflection of the weakened fight against graft in Nigeria. In a publication on June 8, 2017, the newspaper observed that stealing public funds in Nigeria is possible because suspects go unpunished unlike in China where 'there is rule of law...where it is almost impossible to steal government funds without facing the consequences'.

A leading Nigerian, Dr. Tunde Bakare while writing for *The Nation* on June 20, 2017 prescribed the 'China model' as the cure for extreme poverty and corruption in Nigeria. Bakare said the Chinese government has taken a more radical approach to combating corruption to providing the citizenry with their basic needs and growing a prosperous economy, which provides opportunities for citizens to realize their dreams. The publication submits that this strategy remained key to fighting corruption in other developing countries, including Nigeria.

Similarly, an article on 'Labor's Timely Campaign' published in *The Nation* on September 13, 2015 is supportive of China's anti-graft campaign. According to the report, harsh punishment, including death penalties have gone a long way in mitigating the impact of fraud, while conversely, in Nigeria, corruption thrives because people are not scared of the consequences of being corrupt, the report says.

Chicago Tribune versus Leadership:

Our investigations reveal a similar pattern witnessed in the newspapers already analyzed. While the *Chicago Tribune* frames its reports on the campaign skeptically, the *Leadership* reports indicate an approval and a step that should be replicated in Nigeria to curb graft in the country.

Chicago Tribune

Our study shows that *Chicago Tribune* framing of the anti-corruption war did not deviate from what we found in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. For instance, on October 27, 2017, *Chicago Tribune* carried a report in which it claimed the anti-corruption campaign is a disguised effort by Xi to further stifle the opposition in a 'failed' attempt to portray himself as a saint.

The newspaper on February 16, 2018 carried a screaming headline which to alert its readers that Xi is hiding under the guise of anti-corruption crusade to crush opposition and potential leaders. A story under the headline 'China charges former rising political star with bribery'

carried on February 16, 2018, by *Chicago Tribune* gives a cue that the Chinese administration is out to dim the political light of a rising star in a 'sweeping' anti-corruption campaign.

The newspaper also took advantage of Chinese students' protest against tenure extension for Xi to underline its disapproval of the anti-corruption campaign. Reporting on the protest on March 9, 2018 under the headline: Chinese students in America say 'not my president', the newspaper asserted that 'since he assumed office in late 2012, Xi has consolidated power through sweeping anti-corruption campaigns that have felled rivals, establishing himself as the most powerful Chinese since Mao Zedong'.

The *Chicago Tribune* likened the anti-corruption campaign of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia to that of Xi. In a November 9, 2017 news story, the newspaper said the monarch 'has been rounding up rivals in a graft raid' in an attempt to pacify the ruling elite and consolidate his grip on power.

Leadership

Another example of Nigerian newspapers approval of the anti-corruption campaign in China is a piece in the June 30, 2018 edition of the *Leadership* in which the Nigerian government declared its readiness to learn from Chinese in its own fight against graft.. Similarly, in an editorial, 'Bribe as Gold Mine' published on August 18, 2017 in the newspaper berated Nigerian authorities for allowing corruption to fester because unlike in China, the menace was being treated with kid gloves. 'In places like China', it says, 'we have it on good authority that it will not only bring down a public figure but also send him to the gallows.'



Figure 5 shows a headline in the *Leadership* newspaper, June 30, 2018 edition, indicating Nigerian government's readiness to leverage in China's approach to fighting corruption

In another report under the headline, ‘Amnesty taken too far’ published on July 12, 2017, the *Leadership* said death penalty or life jail, as meted out in China against acts of corruption convicts would be a good recipe against corruption in Nigeria.

By pairing the papers from the two countries against one another, this approach enabled the researchers to compare and contrast the reports and draw conclusions. The diversity in the choice of countries whose media were selected for this study both geographically and culturally further strengthens the novelty in this investigation. It is therefore no surprise that this diversity is reflected in our findings. The easy option would be to study the media from one country alone but that approach does not give any glimpse into how the media elsewhere perceives the campaign, it will, therefore, be a fertile ground for imaginative rather than fact-based conclusions.

CONCLUSION

Our investigations reveals that the analyzed U.S. newspapers are at best, skeptical about the sincerity of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. The frame their reports in manner to reflect this skepticism and their disapproval of the Xi’s administration approach to fighting corruption. Through their deliberate choice of words, they try to create the impression that the campaign is politically motivated to help suppress opposition and consolidate Xi’s foothold on power. The reports tend to create the impression that Xi is hypocritical, selfish and a power monger. Conversely, the campaign is favorably received and framed by the surveyed Nigerian print media. They view the anti-graft as sincere and having far-reaching effects in tackling corruption in China. In many instances, the surveyed media wished that Nigerian government could apply similar harsh stance in its own anti-corruption war. Nigerian newspapers see it as a necessary measure to boost public confidence in the Chinese system, hence their crave that it should be applied in Nigeria where corruption, as in China, is also endemic.

Implications for further research:

This study opens a vista of potential scholarly investigations into the actions and policies of governments reverberate abroad. Similar studies should be conducted on various governments’ policies and their perception by the international media. Such studies could also explore their impact on bilateral relations. They would be vital in strengthening or weakening arguments for and against media effect theories.

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