

Newspaper advocacy and the reform of weak anti-graft laws in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *The study interrogates how the media mounted pressure on state actors to review weak anti-graft legislation in Nigeria. Content analysis was adopted for the study, while 1,520 hard copies of the Daily Sun, The Nation and Daily Trust as well as Vanguard and The Punch newspapers published from 2015-2019 were examined. The study was anchored on Framing Theory. Data collected were presented in tables and frequencies and were analyzed with the ANOVA statistical tool. Findings indicate that there was no significant difference in the degree of pressure mounted on state actors by the newspapers to review weak anti-corruption laws. The study recommends that media organizations must re-calibrate their editorial policies aimed at pressurizing state actors into addressing loopholes inherent in the legal framework in the fight against sleaze in the country.*

KEYWORDS: framing, anti-corruption war, sleaze, media, pressure, advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the press in the anti-graft war particularly in developing nations including Nigeria has continued to dominate conversations in the global arena. This is so because of the catastrophic effect of the malaise on the growth and development of the third world countries. Hassan (2018), while lamenting the toxic consequences of corruption in Nigeria, points out that taking pragmatic measures to curb corruption is of vital importance to Nigeria's future given its implication on security, political, social and economic prospects of the country. Aliogo (2019) opines that the media plays important by raising public awareness on causes of corruption, its consequences and possible remedies. The media does this by investigating and reporting incidences of corruption and stimulating other oversight and prosecutorial bodies into action. On the other hand, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) in its second of policy round-table brought 'the role of

the media in anti-corruption campaign,' to the fore of national discourse with a focus on how to create a solid road-map for the media, in its anti-corruption fight (Hassan 2019).

The mass media, may not be the traditional tools to prosecute the anti-corruption war, however, they are strategic in driving the cultural and legislative change needed to make laws and organisational changes sustainable (Rajak 2014). According to the researcher, the media can amplify the effect of anti-corruption legislation by mobilising and reaching broader audience, motivating political and all categories of leaders to act and by accentuate a cultural change aimed at improving the jurisprudence of any nation. Furthermore, the researcher posits that the media is crucial in changing the beliefs of people about the pervasiveness and legitimacy of corrupt practices noting therefore, the media's ability to change norms, behaviour and perceptions that form the core of their relevance in the fight against corruption. Bebenimibo (2017) asserts that the consequential effect of the news media on audiences tends to be determined by the media's ability to present the stories in a certain style noting that in performing this function, the media deliberately highlight a specific element of an issue and attach salience to it.

Edmond and Wilson (2018), also aver that credible media exercise strong influence over the public and can play important part in revealing improper and unfair administrative policies and legislations in the fight against corruption. Arogundade (2018) says the media should endeavour to play the advocacy role by ensuring that critical stakeholders are galvanised to join the anti-corruption fight, otherwise, the generality of the public and the nation at large would continue to suffer under-development. In Nigeria, with over 200 media outlets, only few media outlets that are pushing the campaign forward. The challenge is that only few media outlets that appear to be committed to the anti-corruption agenda.

Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) in its report, titled "Letting the Big Fish Swim" states that the immunity clause engrained in the Nigerian constitution has mutated into a potent platform to perpetrate corruption and immoral conduct in Nigeria, noting that there seems to be some sacred cows amongst the governors, who hide under the cloak of immunity to commit atrocities (SERAP, 2018). According to the report presented to the media by a senior lecturer at the Nigerian Law School, Abuja Campus, Dr. Esa Onoja, a Litigation and Professional Ethics expert, in the investigation, prosecution and trial of high profile corruption cases in Nigeria, submits that, justice is imprisoned by snares contrived by actors in the legal community in aid of looters. Specifically, the report indicates that while the main anti-corruption agencies secured more than 1,500 non-high profile convictions from 2000-2017, they could only muster 10 high profile convictions within the same period.

Former Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN), Walter Onnoghen, alluded to this recently, while stating that corruption in the judiciary is not limited to bribe-taking but includes giving of judgments or orders based on any consideration other than legal merit, (AllAfrica.com, 2018). AllAfrica Global Media (2018) in its submission advised the National Assembly to amend provisions of anti-

corruption legislation, criminal justice legislation, and the Evidence Act that enable defendants to prolong trials or that are disadvantageous to efficient presentation of cases in court of law. Banire (2015) says even the procedural law must be reviewed and attributed undue delays in the prosecution of anti-corruption cases, to numerous conflicting provisions in the legal framework, some of which are unintelligible and obsolete. Agbakwuru (2019), while speaking on the 'Mutual Assistant in criminal matters Act, 2019' a law designed to assist the Buhari administration in the war against corruption and criminality, explains that the law also assists the government obtain from other countries, on reciprocal basis, mutual assistance in the prosecution of criminal matters including the location and identification of suspects, witnesses and other materials for prosecution of criminal matters, tracing, freezing, restraining, recovery, forfeiture and confiscation of proceeds, property and other instrumentalities of crime.

Iriekpen (2018) believes that the Nigerian judiciary undermines the Anti-Corruption war, when it allows convicts of corruption to walk free with light sentences. Citing a recent judgment where "Igbodalo was sentenced to 45 years imprisonment for stealing a Sony Ericson mobile phone that is not worth N7,000, while those who fleeced the country of N6 billion were given the options to pay paltry sums as fines!" Iriekpen (2018), argues that despite what the law prescribes as penalty, judges are expected to use their discretion properly, especially in an era, when the country is doing everything to reduce corruption to the barest minimum. According to him, the malaise called corruption is seen as one of the greatest challenges inhibiting growth and development arguing, that the damage corruption has done to the nation and the generality of the people is unquantifiable.

Statement of the Problem

There is widespread belief that corruption is responsible for the under-development in Third World countries, including Nigeria (Enweremadu, 2012; Transparency International, 2016). It was on this premise that President Muhammadu Buhari, in the 2015 South-South Zonal Presidential Election presidential campaign rally in Port-Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, said if efforts are not made to eradicate corruption in Nigeria, corruption will exterminate Nigerians. This is a position he re-echoed in his inaugural speech while taking the oath of office on May 29, 2015, declaring that he will be dispassionate in his anti-corruption war (Premium Times, 2015).

Several studies have dealt extensively on anti-corruption stories by the mass media, however, sufficient studies have not placed emphasis on the advocacy to review weak anti-corruption laws in Nigeria. The crux of this study therefore, is to fill this gap.

Objectives of the Study are to:

1. ascertain the extent to which pressure mounted by newspapers on state actors has strengthened the review of Anti-Corruption laws.
2. establish whether there is significant difference in the extent of pressure mounted by newspapers to review weak anti-corruption laws in order to strengthen the anti-corruption war

The study also worked with two research questions which included the following:

1. to what extent has the pressure mounted on state actors by the newspapers strengthened the review of weak Anti-Corruption laws in Nigeria?
2. is there a significant difference in the extent of pressure mounted by the newspapers to review weak anti-corruption laws in Nigeria?

Content categories examined in this study are news stories only. Editorials (official position on the subject), photographs and cartoons are not part of the study. Furthermore, features/articles, letters to the editor, opinions and foreign news as well as advertisements, fashion, sports and other entertainment materials were not considered in the study.

The study provides newspaper organizations the needed data to re-appraise their editorial framework on coverage of anti-corruption stories. The study also provides academic frame work that fills noticeable gap(s) in the review of previous studies on framing of anti-corruption coverage for further studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corruption as a concept is difficult to define with precision because of cultural relativity resulting in different perceptions of the word (Park, 2012). Many scholars and human rights activists including organizations have defined or described corruption in different ways based on their orientation. For instance, Tanzi (1998), Ladipo (2000), Aduda (2007), Svensson (2005) and Transparency International (2009) agree that corruption is the abuse or misuse of public office or power for private gain or benefit. There is a consensus among them that public office is abused when officials accept, solicit, or extort bribe, and when private agents offer bribes to circumvent public policies and processes for competitive advantage and profits.

A common position adopted by those who have researched extensively on the subject of corruption, is that there is no nation irrespective of advancement that is completely immune from the scourge of corruption and its tendencies. (Halilu, Garba & Abdulmumin, 2014; Transparency International, 2021). This position is accentuated by statistics from the 2021 Global Perception of Corruption Index released by Transparency International (TI). Out of the 168 countries assessed in the 2021 index, no single country recorded ‘a perfect score’ with two-thirds scoring below 50 in an index where the scale is “0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean)” (TI, 2021).

However, some definitions offered by some scholars were adopted for this study. Lawal (2007) sees corruption as deliberate diversion of resources from the satisfaction of the general interest for personal gain. In the same vein, Adewale (2011) cited in Nageri, Gunu, and Abdul (2013) explains corruption as the process of diverting the resources meant for developmental purposes of the society to private use. Nageri *et al.*, (2013) assert further that the consequences of corruption on the growth and development of a country are quite debilitating.

Also, Rajak (2014) explains corruption as manipulating public office for private gain or use of official position, rank or status by the individual occupying an office for his own personal benefit. Deducing from Rajak's definition, examples of corrupt behaviour would include: bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, cronyism, appropriation of public assets and property for private use and influence peddling. In this list of corrupt behaviour, activities such as fraud and embezzlement can be undertaken by an official alone and without involvement of a second party. While others such as bribery, extortion and influence peddling involve two parties – the giver and taker in a corrupt deal. Furthermore, Idris and Salisu (2016) define corruption as any action deliberately perpetrated by any person or group of persons either in the public or private sector aimed at securing undue advantage for oneself, relation or third party against established procedures, morals or ethical standards.

Media and the anti-corruption war

The media often referred to as the 'fourth estate of the realm' have an indirect but crucial role in influencing the political system. The expression 'fourth estate of the realm' was first used in a parliamentary debate more than two centuries ago in England. Despite the fact that the media is not directly part of the political system but yet they wield significant power and influence and do bring about changes in policies (Cooke, 2019). Edmond and Wilson (2018) posit that because credible media exercise strong influence over the public, they play crucial roles in investigating allegations of impropriety whether financial or otherwise in public affairs, expose corruption and corrupt practices. Coronel (2009) lends credence to the position of Edmond and Wilson (2018), submits that these roles become even more important when existing political institutions are weak and inefficient in ensuring accountability of public servants.

For Arogundadeh (2016), media ownership in Nigeria, excessive commercialization of news, the 'public relations' news phenomenon which supplants independent news reporting and self-censorship as well as unmerited conferment of awards by media organizations and Journalists associations on individuals/corporations and the practice of retentions, make it difficult for the media to play its watchdog role over public authorities. Staphenurst (2000), is of the view that a 'hard-hitting reporting provides the needed impetus for official bodies to launch formal investigations', Staphenurst (2000), is persuaded that another effect of anti-corruption journalism by the media is to assist in re-orientating the society through reports that are against tolerance of corruption by African culture. Halilu, Garba & Abdulmumin (2014), observe that the ratio of anti-corruption coverage was insignificant compared to other stories like politics and economy. Halilu *et al.*, maintain that prominence was also not given to anti-corruption stories in the newspapers they reviewed. In their separate studies, they are unanimous in their submission that anti-corruption stories were not properly followed up and investigated and were also not given in-depth coverage to stimulate robust public discourse on the issues, prompting them to recommend massive and aggressive media sensitization. deVreese (2004), persistence is a key variable for media framing to be impactful in reporting issues that relate to corruption and by extension supporting the war on

corruption. For them, this on one hand, corroborates the position of Yoza (2015) that massive media coverage is crucial to exposing corrupt practices in public service or corridors of power.

However, Yung and Deborah (2017) submit that the most important position to find such representations of society's most critical events is a newspaper's front page. However, they aver that stories are not the only elements contained on the front page, pointing out that other carefully designed elements including but not limited to headlines and photos, must be given due consideration. The first page of the newspaper provides the menu that wets the appetite of a reader prompting editors to devote much energy and dexterity in determining stories that should make the most prized page of their publication (McQuail, 2010; Singer, 2001). Moen (2000) says the goal of the front page is to make the newspaper irresistible to readers until they grab a copy of the newspaper. Idogun (2018) corroborates this position by noting that the front page could contain headlines of news stories, pictures and other graphical illustrations to command the attention of prospective readers. Reisner (1992), argues, that the functionality of the front page, makes designing the front page a complex process because the editor must ensure that important stories must be featured prominently to entice impulsive buyers. Similarly, Shoemaker & Reese (2013) posit that organizational politics, such as conflict, whether vertical or horizontal, have the tendency to determine how stories are selected for the front page. Edmond and Wilson (2018) however, submit that though the issues of corruption were reported frequently by newspapers, they reported corruption stories mainly in the inside pages. On frequency and prominence, Salaudeen, Adebisi and Sanni (2018) in their study of newspapers that covered numerous corruption-related stories reveal that while front page attention was limited for the two newspapers, they found that 11.7% of corruption-related stories in *The Guardian* and 10.8% in *The Punch* gave front page attention which meant that prominence given to corruption-related stories by the two newspapers was abysmally low in their coverage of the subject. The authors found the two newspapers appear to be neglecting their roles of supporting government policies on the war against graft as posited by Eme (2013) and Yoza (2015) who identified adequate media exposure as a strategy in fighting corruption.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated in the framing theory. The basis of framing theory is that the media focus attention on certain events and then place them within a field of meaning. Framing has gained prominence due to its influence in communication and other studies. Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) attributes the origin of framing to Bateson (1955/1972), who used the term 'frame' with the current sense for the first time in an essay on the Psychology of Perception. Bateson (1955/1972), explains the concept of frame by using two analogies of a picture frame and Venn diagrams, which are used in mathematical set theory. Bateson sees frame, as the diagram that includes the elements of a mathematical set with a dual function of including elements within its borders and excluding items that are without just like a picture frame that tries to organise people's perception by urging people to pay attention to what is within it and to ignore what is outside of it. Framing became useful for the study of journalistic messages especially because the media have a prodigious capability to

provoke and alter the social frameworks of interpretation in the information chain (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Available data reveal that the first communication research article that used the term framing was published in 1980 in *Journalism Quarterly*, and in the 2001-2005 period, the number of articles indexed in Communication Abstracts reached 165 (Weaver, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative and qualitative content analysis adopted for this study. Five hard copies of general interest newspapers with national spread, wide circulation and robust editorial policies were selected through purposive sampling method. Five newspapers published between June 2015 and May 2019 amounting to 7,305 editions of the newspapers sourced from the Petroleum Training Institute, PTI, Library, Effurun, Delta State, were used for the study. Secondary data generated from this study were analysed using descriptive and discuss analysis of all selected content categories to determine the degree of pressure mounted on state actors by the newspapers to review weak anti-corruption laws. The data were presented in tables and frequencies while the ANOVA statistical tool was used to test research question 2. To further reduce the sample size to a manageable proportion, the Krejcie and Morgan table, Bukhari (2021), for determining sample size for a given population was also used to determine the sample size. Consequently, a total sample of 380 copies for each of the 5 newspapers amounting to 1,520 copies annually, formed the total sample size for the study. To further determine the editions of the newspapers selected, each edition of the newspaper was examined to ascertain if there were specific days in the week that anti-corruption stories were published before they were purposively selected. Thereafter, a systematic random sampling technique, with an interval of 3, was used to select the total number of newspapers studied.

Table 1: Samples of selected Daily Newspapers with national coverage in Nigeria

S/N	Newspaper	Year				Total
		June 2015- May 2016	June 2016 -May 2017	June 2017- May 2018	June 2018- May 2019	
1	<i>Daily Trust</i>	76	76	76	76	304
2	<i>Daily Sun</i>	76	76	76	76	304
3	<i>The Nation</i>	76	76	76	76	304
4	<i>The Punch</i>	76	76	76	76	304
5	<i>Vanguard</i>	76	76	76	76	304
	Total	380	380	380	380	1,520

Source: Field work, 2022.

Table 1 above contains the editions of each of the newspaper selected through simple random sampling annually for the study. Seventy-six copies of each newspaper were selected each year until the total sample size was collected for the study.

Intercoder reliability

In this study, the inter-coder reliability technique was used to test the reliability of the instrument in the coding of the measurable variables. To ensure coding reliability and consistency in tandem with the content categories, two coders independently coded selected samples of the 2015 to 2019 editions of the five newspapers. The coders judged a sample of thirty-five editions and agreed on 26. Therefore, the inter-coder reliability was calculated using the Holsti's (1969) formula cited in Erubami (2019) to ascertain the reliability levels.

$$C. R = \frac{2M}{N1+N2}$$

Where M is the number of coding decisions on which two coders agreed and N1 and N2 are the total number of coding decisions by the first and second coder respectively (Ekwueme, 2017). Two coders were trained and allotted the November edition of the two newspapers.

$$\text{Thus, reliability} = \frac{2(26)}{35+35} = \frac{52}{70} = 0.74.$$

Therefore, the inter-coder reliability coefficient was 0.74 a figure greater than the acceptable coefficient of reliability 0.70 percent Wimmer & Dominick (2011).

The study evaluated only hard copies of five selected newspapers with national spread, robust editorial policies from June 2015 to May 2019. Content categories examined in this study included news stories, editorials (official positions of newspapers on the issue) and feature articles/opinions. However, foreign news, advertisements and fashion as well as pictures and cartoons, sports and other entertainment materials did not form part of the study.

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Data Presentation and analysis

Research Question 1. What is the extent of pressure mounted on state actors by the newspapers to strengthen the review weak anti-corruption laws in Nigeria?

Table 2. Extent of pressure mounted by newspapers on state actors to review weak anti-corruption laws.

Newspaper	June-2015-May 2016	June-2016-May-2017	June-2017-May-2018	June-2018-May-2019	Total	%
<i>Daily Trust</i>	2	4	6	7	19	20.2
<i>Daily Sun</i>	-	1	2	-	3	3.2
<i>The Nation</i>	7	15	12	10	44	46.8
<i>The Punch</i>	2	4	3	3	12	12.8
<i>Vanguard</i>	3	5	6	2	16	17.0
Total	14	29	29	22	94	100

Source: Field work, 2022.

Table 2 above illustrates the extent of pressure mounted by the newspapers on state actors to review weak laws on anti-corruption. *Daily Trust* in its entire publications during the period under review published 19 stories calling on state actors to review weak anti-corruption laws in the country. *Daily Sun* published only 3 stories on the subject, *The Nation* published 44 stories, *The Punch* captured 12 issues on the subject during the period under review while *Vanguard* published 16 stories to mount pressure on state actors to review weak laws for the same period.

2. Research Question 2. Is there a significant difference in the extent of pressure mounted by newspapers on state actors to review weak anti-corruption laws?

Table 3. ANOVA on the extent of pressure mounted by newspapers on state actors to review weak anti-corruption laws.

ANOVA

Newspapers

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.171	3	1.390	.830	.481
Within Groups	150.733	90	1.675		
Total	154.904	93			

The ANOVA statistics on Table 3 above revealed the extent of pressure mounted by the newspapers on state actors to review weak anti-corruption legislation. It indicates that there is no significant difference in their mean responses. $F = (3.90) = 1.390$ and $P = 0.481$. From the Table above, there is no statistical significant difference in the degree of pressure mounted by the selected newspapers on state actors to review weak anti-corruption laws.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In addressing the research questions, the five newspapers examined in this study, show clearly that the amount of corruption stories published were marginal. The findings also established that the media content on the subject did not make the needed impact (strengthening the review of weak Anti-Corruption laws by state actors). This finding compliments that of Halilu *et al.*, (2014) who discovered that the ratio of anti-corruption coverage was not significant compared to other stories like politics and economy. This confirms the position of Maharjan (2018) that the propaganda model which focuses on inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices, can filter the news, suppress dissent, and allow the government, powerful and dominant private interests to get their messages across the public. The study found that anti-corruption stories were not given in-depth coverage as there was little investigation and follow-up needed to induce public discourse. Also, the finding is in agreement with the position of Rajak (2014) that the media may not be the traditional tools in the fight against corruption but are crucial in achieving the cultural change that must accompany any legislative change to make laws and institutional changes sustainable. Furthermore, the finding confirms the position of Stapenhurst (2000) that the press must devote sufficient space and efforts to scrutinize legislation and regulations of a country to expose weak and ambivalent provisions that encourage corruption. He submitted that in Zambia and majority of countries in Africa, there are several laws and regulations that impede the press from access to crucial information thereby making investigative journalism cumbersome thus shielding corrupt state actors from scrutiny. In lending credence to Stapenhurst's position, Coronel (2009) submits that these roles become even more important when existing political institutions are weak and inefficient in ensuring accountability of public servants. Edmond and Wilson (2018) conclude that credible media, therefore exercise strong influence over the public and play an important part in revealing improper and unfair administrative actions and corruption.

The findings also confirm the study of Halilu, Garba, and Abdulmumin (2014) which maintained that prominence was also not given to anti-corruption stories in the newspapers they reviewed as anti-corruption stories were not properly followed up, investigated and given in-depth coverage to stimulate robust public discourse on the issues. It is also in consonance with the position of Stapenhurst (2000) on the role of the media in curbing corruption through robust reportage that leads to 'readily identifiable' results and that of Phiri (2008) that robust media coverage of corruption cases provides the oxygen that galvanize anti-corruption bodies to launch formal investigations especially where such bodies are sometimes reluctant to investigate corruption allegations. Furthermore, the findings also confirmed the position of Asomah (2020) that media houses and Journalists with strong affinities to political parties are likely to engage in partisan reporting for gratifications and that of Salaudeen *et al.* (2018) that newspaper reportage on anti-corruption stories suggest the possibility of partisan framing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several media scholars believe that inherent in the media, described as the fourth estate of the realm, lies the capacity to engineer socio-cultural, ideological and institutional changes that can help stimulate the formulation and effective anti-graft legislation in a democratic society where the press has unfettered space to operate. The study however concludes that given the devastating consequences of corruption in the country, the newspapers evaluated did not give sufficient attention to corruption stories that can trigger agitation for the amendments of weak laws that serve as oxygen for corruption in Nigeria.

Media organizations should re-calibrate their editorial policies to pressurize and provoke state actors into action in order to address loopholes inherent in the legal framework in the fight against sleaze in the country. Following the above conclusion, the study recommends as indicated below:

1. Media organizations should review their news value with regards to commercialization of news stories with a view to increasing the ratio of anti-corruption stories.
2. Media organizations should constantly engage critical stakeholders and state actors through media round-tables, town halls and strategic communication with a view to influencing their opinions on the need to rework legislation that encourage graft in the country.
3. Media organizations should recalibrate their editorial policies to pressurize and provoke state actors into action in order to address loopholes inherent in the legal framework in the fight against sleaze in the country.

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