

FRAMING THE WAR ON CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA THROUGH THE EYES OF JOURNALISTS

By

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Abstract

Drawing on the framing theory, this study examines the role of Nigerian journalists in the fight against corruption. From 25 in-depth interviews with journalism professionals who covered corruption cases between 2015 and 2019, and a content analysis of press coverage of corruption stories (n = 1, 124) during that period, the study asserts that journalists' lived reality does not reflect the expectation that they would expose corruption or contribute to the fight against corruption. The perception of anti-corruption by journalists is often shaped by a constructed narrative that prioritises the interests of political and media elites. Existential challenges such as media ownership, organisational constraints, and limited resources, can influence journalists' frames of reference. These challenges prevent them from conducting comprehensive or long-term corruption investigations in the country, which can lead to distorted narratives that undermine the core values of the anti-corruption war.

Keywords: Anti-corruption war, journalists, framing, Nigeria

Introduction

Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, researchers have shown considerable interest in examining how successive Nigerian governments have attempted to combat corruption in the country (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011; Akanle & 2015; Smith, 2018; Nwozor et al, 2020). In many of these studies, the focus has been on factors that contribute to the entrenchment of corruption in the country, how effective the fight against corruption has been, the challenges facing it, speculations regarding the possible abandonment of the anticorruption war and what steps can be taken to ensure that the anti-corruption crusade continues. Often, the role of the media is underemphasised because of the long-standing instinct to read corruption and media in terms of gratification or 'brown envelope' for journalists who cover the news, which can obscure the important role they play in shaping perceptions about anti-corruption coverage. However, journalistic roles in understanding the government's efforts to tackle corruption are significant because they can help analyze progress in the fight against corruption and assess its effectiveness. Thus, this study aims to understand the dynamics between journalism practitioners, the challenges they face, and the broader context of Nigeria's ongoing battle against corruption.

Generally, an anti-corruption fight can be considered a political approach that aims to represent the common people against corruption or the wiles of elites, and it is often associated with anti-establishment and anti-thievery ideologies. A central argument advanced in this article is that journalists may not always expose corruption or contribute to the fight against it due to their lived reality's complexities. These complexities can sometimes undermine the values associated with anti-corruption endeavours and impede the promotion of political accountability within society. Esser et al (2017), posits that the media should, at any time, present reliable information that strives to benefit society, fulfilling the watchdog ideal, irrespective of any particular institution. This article seeks to further explore the implications of these complexities on journalists' ability to effectively promote political accountability.

This study utilizes a mixed method approach combining content analysis of corruption stories to understand the narratives present in the news coverage and interviews with journalists who cover corruption stories to address the following research questions: What were the patterns of news coverage of corruption related news under the Nigerian government between 2015 and 2019?

In what light do Nigerian print journalists view the fight against corruption in the period under study? What challenges did Nigerian print journalists face in processing corruption stories into news? In this paper, a historical context of the fight against corruption is provided, followed by a theoretical framework and literature review. The methods and data sources are outlined, followed by the study's findings and discussion presented in the final section.

Media, corruption, and the challenges of public discourse in Nigeria

Among the critical roles played by the media in explaining corruption, setting the agenda, and determining public opinion, Akanle & Adesina (2015), noted that the media often lack the capacity to maintain coverage on corruption and corrupt officials. While the media has proven capable of exposing corruption, it often lacks the capacity to follow up. The factors affecting journalism practice in Nigeria were examined by Yushau (2010), focusing on corruption coverage. According to him, the practice of journalism in the country is subject to regional parallelism due to ethnic, sectional, political and religious differences, although he notes that these distinctions are not definitive (2010). Lawson (2009) notes that neopatrimonialism plays a vital role in the politics of anti-corruption reforms in Africa. For instance, in their study of the anti-corruption war between 1999 and 2008, Adebawale and Obadare (2011) concluded that the most salient impediments to anti-corruption campaigns are due to clashes between members of the ruling elite, which are reflective of the power dynamics and patrimonialism present in Nigeria.

They proposed that anti-corruption campaigns are a threat to the material status of the elite and thus often incur vehement responses from those in power. Beyond this, Smith (2007, 2018) also asserts that corrupt practices are deeply embedded within the Nigerian culture, as

many ordinary citizens have become ensnared in patron-client relationships and other identity-based alliances with specific members of the elite. Consequently, there are political strategies in place that are aimed at establishing a direct connection between the strong personalistic leader and the citizens within this context where the former employ populist narratives that place the 'people' at the core of speeches and decisions, aiming to demonstrate responsiveness to the public concerns. In essence, part of the core values of the fight against corruption is that it is seen as a policy that the public needs to survive and prosper.

The success of the ruling political party, All Progressives Congress (APC) at the polls in 2015, for instance, which marked the first time an opposition political party would clinch power at the federal government since Nigeria gained sovereignty from British rule in 1960, came into power primarily on the strength of a campaign message of change which was anchored on an anti-corruption war. During a political rally, its presidential flagbearer at that time, Muhammadu Buhari said, 'if we don't kill corruption, this corruption will kill us.' Prior to that, the quest to combat corruption had led to the introduction of military rule in Nigeria. While it may appear that the military used the anti-corruption war as a smokescreen to overthrow democratically elected governments, initial reports indicate that coupists and their collaborators were often hailed as heroes by the people. The lack-lustre leadership over the years has cast doubts in the minds of Nigerians whether the war on corruption is really being fought to be won.

As Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, many Nigerians and outside observers saw Nigeria's first serious anticorruption efforts (Smith, 2018). The then President Obasanjo in his first year in office created the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC) and also established the Economic and Financial Crimes (EFCC) by 2002. However, the anti-corruption crusade faced undue political interference particularly from the presidency which impacted on the effectiveness of the fight against corruption (Nwozor, Olarewaju, Oshewolo, Ake, 2020).

In 2015, when former Head of State Muhammadu Buhari was returned as an elected president, there were high hopes for the anti-corruption fight because many voters perceived him as an austere, honest and patriotic leader. He was even viewed as a messiah, particularly

among his supporters in his northern base. While a number of achievements were made regarding anti-corruption under his watch, critics argue that corruption deepened during his tenure (2015-2019). In addition to the existing anticorruption agencies, the Buhari-led government introduced a whistle-blower policy in December 2016, which pledged a reward worth 2.5% -5% of funds recovered by the government to whistle blowers. Executive Order 6 was another measure introduced and it aims to bar individuals being tried for corruption from travelling outside of Nigeria to prevent them from absconding and /or accessing properties located outside the country and suspected holding proceeds from corruption. A third measure was Executive Order 8, which aimed to tackle tax evasion and money laundering through the Voluntary Offshore Assets Regularisation Scheme with a period of grace attached to it beyond which there will be a sanction.

A fourth measure was the full implementation of the Treasury Single Account (TSA), which was conceived but not implemented by his immediate predecessor, ex-president Goodluck Jonathan. The Buhari government also established PACAC, the intellectual component of the anti-corruption fight. Finally, it probed the financial irregularities surrounding procurement of arms to combat the Boko Haram insurgency which uncovered huge sums of money diverted to fund the failed re-election bid of his immediate predecessor. This study would examine how the Nigerian journalistic community covered this long-running corruption issue and the challenges they faced in translating this event into news.

It is important to mention here however, that the Nigerian media, which is largely dominated by Southern interests¹, played an important role in highlighting corruption and holding his government to account. Also worth noting is that colonialism led to uneven development of the nation's media, contributing to a cultural gap between the North and the South, with southern media more prominent.

¹Essentially, this means that the media industry in Nigeria is largely controlled by southern media owners.

Literature Review

According to Hamada et al. (2019), journalism significantly impacts corruption depending on the national and international context in which it operates. Ngene (2016) examined newspaper readers' perceptions of anticorruption campaigns in Nigeria and acknowledged the importance of the press in providing a watchdog function through editorials against corruption. Studies have also acknowledged that an independent press has many beneficial effects on society. These effects include combatting corruption by providing citizens with information that allows them to actively participate in politics, punish corrupt officials and elect trustworthy successors.

Corruption and power dynamics are key to understanding the intricacies of governance in many African countries, including Nigeria. Corruption within political settlements serves a number of purposes, including enabling certain individuals and groups to extract resources and legitimise corrupt practices through ideological narratives (Behuria, et al, 2017). For instance, in December 2015, *The Punch*, one of Nigeria's leading dailies urged the media to reject government patronage and remain vigilant in their role as society's watchdogs. This followed revelations of diverted security funds to rival outlets, in one of the most significant corruption investigations conducted by Muhammadu Buhari's government (2015-2023), highlighting ethical concerns about media legitimacy and the impact of corruption on its watchdog role.

Extensive research by scholars like Adebani and Obadare (2011), Smith (2018), and Osoba (1996), lays bare the complexities of Nigerian corruption. Komolafe, et al (2019, p.14) criticise media coverage of corruption in Nigeria as 'tabloidisation' and argued that it was a mere repetition of courtroom proceedings albeit with sensationalist content. It is considered by the current researcher that this outlook is rather limited since the authors did not take into account the journalistic decisions that can sway citizens' perceptions of corruption in stories about corruption because it is within such discourses that journalistic roles and identities are 'reproduced and contested' (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). Adebani and Obadare show that the media's role is more than just reporting; it also involves how they navigate and affect power dynamics. As Oso (2001) notes, the intertwined class structures of both the press and politics

in Nigeria have led to ruling-class control, reinforcing the status quo, and fuelling public distrust.

Previous studies have established that corruption has negatively affected the progression of Nigeria, which has not resulted in improved conditions for the average citizen. Thus, in order to ensure basic rights and secure socio-economic benefits, identity-based politics, such as ethnicity and religion, are pushed (Jega, 2000). Scholars suggest economic reforms like privatisation, empowering local governments, and reducing the state's role. This can fuel resource rivalry among ethnic groups, with elites benefiting from or losing out on unequal access. Ethnic politicians may exploit anti-corruption efforts to stoke feelings of cultural threat or use patronage to maintain influence.

Mbaku identifies two types of corruption: political and bureaucratic. As the former consolidates the grip of politicians on power and reduces threats posed to the incumbents by others, the latter allows public officials to skim off the bureaucratic system when allocating and distributing resources (Mbaku, 1998). In this context, powerful actors may seek to silence critical voices, making a free media crucial. Thus, a key role for the media is to provide reliable 'narratives' about what is taking place given their capacity to inscribe news of corruption with different cultural meanings; to delineate the terms of debate, to draw attention to the problems present within such contexts as well as to shed light on the power struggles and conflicts among elite groups. Furthermore, by giving a voice to marginalised and oppressed groups, the media helps hold those in positions of power accountable.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the framing theory, which is based on understanding how the media shapes perceptions in a variety of contexts. According to Erving Goffman, humans rely on frames to simplify the world around them. For the current study, it examines how Nigerian journalists may be incentivised to cover corruption since they are gatekeepers who decide what information is presented to the public and how it is framed. These frames are culturally based and helps to make sense of what is happening in everyday lives (Van Gorp, 2007). Lecheler & De Vreese (2019) asserts that it is necessary to differentiate between

journalistic news frames and journalists' frames. For them, journalistic news frames are manifest frames present in the news that stem from journalistic conventions in creating news stories (news values and story selection, for instance) while journalists frames are comparable to citizen and audience frames, which are the mental representation of issues within the minds of the actors, be they citizens or journalists. Thus, this study also takes into account how frame-building can shape public perception of the fight against corruption, given that journalists personal discourse reflects and reinforces frames found in news content (Bruggeman, 2014; Lewis & Reese, 2009).

Kupyers posits that journalists' frames are influenced by values and belief systems, with a substantial majority of journalists permitting their political ideology to influence their reporting (2014). D'Angelo & Shaw (2018) consider journalists frames as part of the internal factors affecting 'the frame-building process and in some cases can lead to actual journalistic news frames in coverage' (Lecheler and de Vreese, 2019). Scheufele (1999) divides framing into four interrelated processes: frame building, frame setting, individual-level processes of framing and feedback loops from individual level.

In the frame building process, three influences are identified, namely journalist-centred factors (the way journalists shape narratives based on their ideologies beliefs, attitudes and professional norms), organisational characteristics (the media outlet's political orientation and media routines) and external influences such as political actors and interest groups that provide perspectives or sound bites that journalists can incorporate into their coverage (Scheufele, 1999). In the case of Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts, most researchers have often focused on analysing specific, evident, corruption-related news on public opinion, which is less demanding, rather than involving themselves in looking into the intricacies of how these news frames were developed (Edema, Ufuophu-Biri & Igben, 2022; Ahmed, Abdulbaqi, & Adisa 2018; Oriola, Ojomo & Kolade, 2017). In other words, there is a lack of attention to the frame-building process in terms of anti-corruption coverage. Omojola (2010), also asserts that the Nigerian media has not been able to contribute effectively to efforts to combat corruption primarily due to the absence of a viable socio-political ideology.

The frame-setting process, which involves the selection of certain frames over others by journalists, has been identified as a core factor in the mediatisation process. This process can bring about transformation in attitudes at the societal and individual levels in the perception about the fight against corruption. Here, Lecheler and De Vreese (2019) suggests that frames are as a result of journalists' discretion and autonomy, allowing them to modify and adapt frames from elites when covering political, economic and social issues with consequential effect on public opinion. The impact of corruption messaging on individuals has been acknowledged as an important part of anti-corruption initiatives. Research indicates that such messages can sometimes make people feel discouraged about the extent or prevalence of corruption in society (Peiffer, 2018; Cheeseman & Peiffer, 2020). This further adds another layer of complexity to the role of the media in shaping public perceptions regarding corruption.

In environments characterised by a high level of corruption, journalists may face unique challenges that compromise their ability to serve as effective watchdogs (Pellegata & Splendore, 2018). The high prevalence of corruption within media organizations can also compromise the principle of objective reporting (Ileri, 2016). A study on corrupt practices in Nigerian media revealed that a significant proportion of journalists see nothing wrong with accepting gratification from sources, despite being fully aware of the unethical nature of such practices (Aderogba, 2013).

The motivations of journalists in covering corruption are multifaceted. Journalists may be spurred on by positive audience feedback (Pool and Shulman, 1959). Investigative journalism plays a crucial role in uncovering ways in which public officials enrich themselves at the expense of the public (Kramer, 2013). The media's power to discredit political class members through the exposition of 'unacceptable behaviour' provides unparalleled influence in shaping how these individuals are perceived within society (Kramer, 2013, p.61). While the public generally views journalistic information as impartial and objective, lending credibility to the information presented, the frames selected in the frame setting process serve as inputs for the individual framing processes level, where audiences interpret and apply the frames to their experiences and beliefs. Nonetheless, some

scholars however argue that the media does not assign blame to transgressors involved in corruption but provides hints that guide citizens in processing information on corruption (Kepplinger et al, 2012). It is through the interpretation and reaction of the public to such information that a feedback loop is created that has a profound impact on the way the media covers certain issues, such as the fight against corruption. The current study will show that press coverage of corruption stories between 2015 and 2019 and interviews with journalists who covered the cases during that period demonstrate how slanting of corruption news has been consequential for the fight against corruption in Nigeria.

Nigeria's media landscape

The southern region with the most media proprietors in Nigeria dominates the news agenda (Ibraheem, et al, 2015). Private outlets, driven by regionalism and ethnicity, particularly, the 'Lagos-Ibadan' press wields considerable influence, influencing the media market structure. Unlike government-owned broadcasters driven by public service ethos, (which also constrains their editorial freedom), mainstream privately-owned press has been driven by activism critical of public officials, although some journalists have cultivated close ties with politicians and military leaders (Asadu, 2019).

This suggests a 'Polarised Pluralist' media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), marked by censorship and a weak media market, oscillating between market-driven and patronage-based journalism, as exemplified by the opaque allocation of broadcast licenses in 1992 (Abubakre, 2021). Circulation figures remain shrouded in secrecy, with less than 10% of the estimated 50 papers truly prominent. Internet penetration through globalisation has reshaped the Nigerian media landscape with the migration of mainstream newspapers online. Online news, driven by a 24-hour news cycle, dominates among the country's largely youthful population, enabling participation and challenging mainstream outlets. The digital sphere has also enabled hostility among ethnic groups, hate speech, and the incitement to violence to flourish, prompting attempts by the government to introduce legislation to regulate online media (Agbede, 2021).

Methods and data sources

An analysis of how Nigerian journalists frame the fight against corruption is conducted using mixed methods (content analysis and in-depth interviews). The mixed method is based on the principle that combining statistical trends (quantitative data) with stories and personal experiences (qualitative data), provides a better understanding of the research problem than either type of data on its own (Cresswell, 2014). In the quantitative research tradition, content analysis is commonly employed as a technique for data gathering, whereas in the qualitative tradition, it is regarded as a means of data interpretation and analysis (Schreier, 2014).

In this study, frequency is not considered as a definitive outcome, but rather a potential pattern that merits further analysis. As such, framing of corruption stories and perceptions of journalists are both treated as interrelated and complementary to each other, as it is through framing by journalists that we come to grip with their perception. Two research questions were addressed through in-depth interviews while content analysis reveals narratives in news coverage from the same outlets interviewed journalists work at. A two-pronged approach is used: first analysing key actor portrayals, and then conducting inductive analysis to provide context for the identified frames and to obtain a nuanced analysis.

Content Analysis

The content analysis covered May 29, 2015, to May 28, 2019. Punch, Nation, Daily Trust, Vanguard, and ThisDay, as well as Premium Times (an online newspaper), were examined for coverage of a corruption case (an arms procurement deal worth \$2.1 billion USD meant to combat Boko Haram) involving ex-NSA Sambo Dasuki. Lexis-Nexis Academic database and the newspapers websites were used to source articles. A total of 1,124 articles were examined- The Punch =224, The Nation =201, Daily Trust = 162, Vanguard =205 and ThisDay =176 and Premium Times =156, with 93% straight news, 1% editorials and 6% opinion articles.

Most stories were published 2015-2016 (see Figure 1). Yoshikoder, a multilingual content analysis software was used to analyze keyword usage in context (see Table 1). This process allowed the researcher to refine the analysis in order to portray the federal government and Sambo Dasuki, in relation to the arms deal which was helpful towards identifying key themes in the body of text and the surrounding context. Coding was focused on how readers may interpret the portrayal of key actors, which is- overall, how is the federal government treated in the article? And, overall, how is Sambo Dasuki treated in the article? As guidance for coders to assess headlines and text, we used a summated rating scale (1-very negatively portrayed [Holsti's intercoder reliability: 0.90], 2-somewhat negatively portrayed [0.80], 3-Neutral [1.00], 4-somewhat positively portrayed [0.80] and 5-very positively portrayed [0.90]).

Our analysis considers representation of Dasuki or the federal government as "very positively" portrayed (VPP) if the report is deemed favourable. For example, when courts ruled in Dasuki's favour or when individuals or groups defended his cause and advocated for his release or when a defendant in a corruption case indicated a willingness to refund proceeds from corruption and when the government was encouraged to continue the fight against corruption.

"Somewhat positively portrayed" (SPP) indicated less intense favourability, like opposition party defections to the ruling party, benefiting the government. "Very negatively portrayed" (VNP) meant explicit negativity when the report mentioned difficulties, setbacks, criticisms, shame, or events that were problematic or expected to be problematic. For instance, if either of the key actors in the scandal was sued or charged in court, the article was assigned a very negative portrayal. This is exemplified by the following headline and lead:

More trouble for ex-NSA Dasuki

There is no respite yet for former National Security Adviser (NSA) Col. Sambo Dasuki, despite being granted leave to travel out for treatment by a Federal High Court.

Similarly, a somewhat negative portrayal for Dasuki could entail criticisms, problems, and difficulties but less forceful than very negative or just negative parameter. The reason for this

is that Dasuki is mentioned as a secondary character in the story. This is demonstrated by the following headline and lead:

EFCC arrests former Minister, others over alleged \$2billion arms deal

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has arrested a former Minister of State for Finance, Bashir Yuguda, and a number of top officials from the office of the National Security Adviser over the controversial arms procurement scandal surrounding former NSA, Sambo Dasuki.

An example of a somewhat negative portrayal (SNP) for the federal government is if it was urged to release Dasuki or apply restraint on the prosecution of Dasuki. This is shown by the following headline and lead.

Onaiyekan to Buhari: Don't humiliate people to fight corruption

The Metropolitan Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, John Cardinal Onaiyekan has urged the Federal Government to be methodological and avoid humiliating Nigerians in the present administration's quest to rid the nation of corruption.

A unit of analysis was considered to be neutral (N) if it portrayed neither the government nor Dasuki negatively, or if it incorporated the viewpoints of both actors in a balanced way and gave equal space to both sides of the story, such that it neither favoured nor condemned either side. Weighted mean scores for each newspaper compared portrayal of the government and Dasuki. Above 3.00 cutoff indicated positive portrayal, below meant negative (see Figure 2). An inductive frame analysis identified five key frames in the coverage (see Figure 3 which shows the major patterns of corruption coverage).

Findings

Most Nigerian newspapers portrayed ex-NSA Dasuki negatively (weighted mean scores 2.22- 2.89) in the arms deal scandal. The Nation and Premium Times were most critical with weighted mean scores of 2.22 and 2.57, respectively, while Punch and Daily Trust were least negative (2.83-2.89). Although Dasuki was generally presented in an unfavourable light, the

newspapers provided a variety of perspectives which suggests that the perception of Dasuki's complicity in corruption is not entirely clear-cut.

Conversely, the federal government gained generally positive coverage (3.11-3.21) except in ThisDay and Vanguard (2.43-2.52) which offered more criticism of government's anti-corruption war approach. The newspapers that depicted Dasuki in the least unfavourable fashion -Daily Trust and Punch presented Dasuki in a more impartial or even slightly positive manner compared to the other newspapers. Furthermore, the figure indicates that a substantial number of stories were considered neutral, suggesting varied interpretations of the scandal. These findings are significant towards understanding the news outlets' political orientations and the way they prioritise the interests of political and media elites.

Patterns of corruption coverage

Figure 3 shows that 71% of corruption coverage was framed in terms of judicial and corruption narratives. The remaining frames were witch-hunt (14%), democracy/rule of law (8%) and disaffirmation (7%). This shows that although journalists reported mainly on judicial and corruption narratives, other less prominent frames such as witch-hunt and democracy/rule of law were still significant in shaping the narrative of the anti-corruption war. These frames were used by all six news outlets in reporting corruption stories, and their key characteristics are explained below.

Judicial

The judicial frame pertains to how the law is applied to corruption cases and it is central to reporting news about corruption. It involved court proceedings, the citing of legal precepts, the granting of bails and appeals, adjournments and judicial pronouncements on the cases. The coverage of procedural processes in the corruption cases could be likened to a theatre in which ordinary citizens could view those who had allegedly 'sinned' against the country.

Corruption

All six news outlets, especially *The Nation*, used the corruption frame. The corruption frame explicitly highlights wrongdoings of influential individuals and groups and their actions were portrayed as greedy and exploitative of the collective wealth of the nation. It was also a

frame that was promoted indirectly and directly by anticorruption agencies. It was used to draw attention to the problem of corruption, arousing discussion, generating outrage, and spurring conflict between political parties.

Democracy/rule of law

Besides being closely related to the judicial frame, the democracy/rule of law frame was used to establish Nigeria as a fully democratic country where the rule of law was paramount as an alternative to authoritarian or military government. In other words, it is used to caution against dictatorship and reminding the government to follow democratic principles. *ThisDay* and *Vanguard* have emphasised this frame in their news reports on corruption. However, the frame's interpretation changed when it was deployed by *The Nation*, which used it to emphasise that "no one is above the law." A secondary aspect of the democracy/rule of law frame was the suspicion usually associated with the deployment of security agencies in the fight against corruption. Public perception was that security agencies were not serving public interests, particularly in relation to anti-corruption.

Witch-hunt

The witch-hunt frame was a key part of a narrative that addressed corruption. It was pushed by political rivals of the government, portraying the anti-corruption war as a scapegoat used against certain individuals. This narrative was particularly used in the reporting of *ThisDay* and *Vanguard*. Readers of the two newspapers were constantly exposed to perspectives that appeared to be sympathetic to those accused of corruption. *The Nation* tended to crop out the witch-hunt frame.

Disaffirmation

The disaffirmation frame was related to the denial of corruption allegations. This frame preceded the explanations offered by individuals accused of corruption. Such explanations are intended to rectify the negative impression created in the public eye.

In-depth interviews

25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists/editors whose bylines frequently appeared in the corruption stories of the six newspapers. News outlets were selected based on regional focus and influence: *The Punch* and *The Nation* (Southwest),

Daily Trust (North), Vanguard and ThisDay (South-South/Southeast) and Premium Times (online) (see Table 2, which captured an overview of the chosen news outlets and media practitioners.

Using a semi-structured interview facilitates a "relatively natural flow of talking, the freedom for the respondent to explore unpredicted avenues of thought, and the flexibility of the interviewer in selecting specific aspects of the discourse to follow up" (Coolican, 2017, p. 175). Taking this approach is significant in that it sheds light on their hidden feelings, attitudes, and beliefs, and is in line with previous studies (Price, 2019), which focused on a purposive sample of journalists who write about corruption stories.

Participants were categorised as either 'Managerial/Editorial Board' of 'Journalist' based on their role in oversight or reporting/editing. The roles of the two categories overlap, however. The Managerial/Editorial category influences what is eventually published by the medium while the journalist has a significant impact on accessing and framing corruption news. Participants include 9 from managerial /editorial positions (managing editors, chairmen) and 16 journalists (bureau chiefs, senior reporters, state correspondents). Age range was 28-64 years, with journalism experience from 5-35⁺ years. That only two participants were females among the interviewees is only to be expected, given that gender composition and leadership in the newsroom are male-dominated, and women are not likely to be assigned to cover political stories. Although studies have shown that women editors also care about big political stories on corruption that impact the lives of regular people.

Despite the journalists' willingness to speak on the record because they believe the period of this research was not as dire as those dark days of military oppression of the media, keeping the interviews anonymous conforms to accepted social sciences practices. Besides, it was felt that participants would be more comfortable reflecting critically on their journalistic practices if they could do so anonymously. The journalists were not provided with any form of incentives.

The interview data, gathered through face-to-face meetings in Lagos with participants, emails and calls, were recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. The outputs were then analyzed thematically. For the purpose of connecting with the frame-building process, the

researcher asked participants how they viewed the fight against corruption between 2015 and 2019. The reason for this is to gain insight into their attitudes towards the anti-corruption war. The interviews also focused on editorial freedom and organisational factors and challenges in reporting corruption.

Discussion of Findings

Defining the war on corruption

Participants tended to highlight the endemic corruption in Nigeria by lamenting its negative socio-economic and political impacts. They generally perceived the anti-corruption war as 'selective' and 'vendetta seeking', targeting political opponents and low-level offenders while ignoring high-level corruption within the ruling party. As Participant 17 of ThisDay newspaper observed:

The fight against corruption seems to be a cherry-picking kind of thing. It is more like who the government says is corrupt. Those who government says are not corrupt, no matter what the public outcry, they are not corrupt, and are likely to go scot-free. This does not instil confidence in the public to make it look more effective in the prosecution of the anticorruption war.

What this suggests is that while the government has the power to define who is corrupt, journalists do not simply accept government's claims about its anticorruption efforts at face value. Journalists often operate with a Western ideal of accountability in mind as they focus on the actions and inactions of government officials and ruling party members. They utilize this to expose faults in the government's anti-corruption endeavour. The frame of the war on corruption thus often caters to the interests of the political and media elites rather than reflecting the concerns of the general public at large. For instance, it is claimed that a new form of corruption has emerged through ethnicity, with visible acts of nepotism from ex-president Buhari and his associates.

A wall of political imperviousness further compounds this situation as some participants say that their calls for action have been met with deafening silence from the government unlike in the Western world where newspapers play a vibrant role in shaping government policies.

They mention that mainstream outlets have published editorials and opinion articles in an attempt to shed light on the fight against corruption. However, in comparison to countries like *'the United Kingdom, where newspapers shape governments and are used to gauge people's opinions, the Nigerian government has not demonstrated a more encouraging response.'*

Participants argued that the lack or poor response to public concerns about corruption has created a perception of bias that the anticorruption fight selectively targets the opposition party, hence the prevailing sentiment is that the Buhari government predominantly focuses on prosecuting the opposition party. In this circumstance, journalists do not see need to play a loyal-facilitating role or see anti-corruption as a shared national value. Although a prevailing negative portrayal of individuals accused of corruption is reflected in journalistic news frames as gleaned from the content analysis, the nuances of their alleged complicity is not a simple binary of guilty or innocent. Despite journalists' criticism of the government's efforts to tackle corruption, they conceded that corruption had been endemic before the ex-president took office in 2015.

Freedom in the face of influence

The relationship between journalists and media owners is significant in the production of corruption news items. Editorial board participants tend to defend their organisations' integrity in enabling unfettered reporting of corruption.

However, in the case of a run-in with politicians, there is concern among journalists in the field about how far their media organizations will go to protect them during crises.

Editorial boards of *ThePunch*, *Premium Times* and *The Nation*, share an opinion that their roles as media owners have allowed for critical reporting of the government's government anti-corruption efforts resulting in proper monitoring and reporting of abuse of power by political elites. For instance, Participant 7 even cites their publisher's supposed hands-off approach, claiming:

Many people fail to believe that we are leading the anti-corruption war because they assume our publisher, Bola Tinubu², is corrupt. However, he gives us complete freedom; he doesn't interfere with our stories, even when they are stories that affect his friends.

According to Participant 10, of the *Daily Trust*, his contemporaries in southern-based news outlets sometimes found it difficult to accept that *Daily Trust* could take a critical stance against ex-president Buhari, despite his northern origin, showcasing their commitment to independence from ethnic politics. He said, 'we report it as it is, so we can hold the government accountable, and we don't wish to be the megaphone for such politics.'

However, these claims of independence ring hollow in light of journalists' narratives. To illustrate, Participant 21 during the interview pointed out:

Your freedom only stops when you submit your report. So, because of the hierarchy, as a reporter, whether senior reporter or field reporter, your duty is to ensure you get the story. Nobody stops you from writing your story or submitting your report, but where the challenge lies is when you submit it.

While this observation underscores the editorial control wielded during the final production stage, some participants tended to allude to censorship in other media houses before referencing the situation at their own establishments, where stories critical of owners' associates are suppressed, which casts doubt on absolute autonomy. For instance, an editor at *ThisDay* claimed corruption allegations against Tinubu's associates would not be published in *The Nation*. He continued.

Even if Oyetola³ embezzles all the money in Osun State, you can't see it published in The Nation. Even if you see it in ThisDay, you cannot see it in The Nation. You can see it in one or two other papers, but The Nation will not carry [the corruption story]. In our case, if it is Bukola Saraki⁴ of Kwara State, you cannot get to see it in ThisDay because Saraki and my chairman, they are best of friends...

² Tinubu is currently Nigeria's President.

³ Oyetola was a former Governor of Osun State and now a serving Minister

⁴ Saraki is a former Senate President

Similarly, another journalist from *ThisDay* corroborated this opinion that some stories 'would never be published in *ThisDay* depending on who is affected. For example, if anything affects Abba Kyari⁵ now, he is a friend of the house; it will never be published in *ThisDay*.' Another participant noted:

I wrote a story recently and one of the new Ministers under Buhari had to approach my Managing Director; He did not say we should not use the story, but that it should not be on the cover -a corruption story! It is a different ball game in the western world. You are a star if you expose corruption, here in Nigeria, you are derided.

Participant 17 further corroborates this, stating that media owners limit journalists' freedom, protecting friends and loved ones from negative press. 'Friends, associates and loved ones of media owners cannot be seen to be 'stigmatised' by media reports on corruption; such reports are either toned down or not used.' This is the reality of editorial control.

As Participant 6 describes, *there is editorial freedom, although sometimes there is pressure from government officials or ruling party members if they feel the content is not favourable or exposes their corruption.* Participant 14 told the present researcher that, 'it depends on who is involved in the corruption cases. There is wide latitude to report on corruption matters, but there have been times when my reports on corruption cases are censored, especially when the story is exclusive to me.' Participant 16, a senior reporter with *Thisday*, offers another perspective, stating that:

We edit every other thing we need to add and take away anything we feel that might cause trouble or crisis. Sometimes, if a reporter writes a vague story or a sentence or paragraph is not too clear, we can call on the reporter to come and clarify what he meant by so and so. Otherwise, when a reporter writes a story, he goes home.

There must always be a gatekeeper, somebody who sits somewhere to look at a story and say no, this guy is telling lies here. So, anything you know is not factual; you can cut it off to avert the problem. We do that well, and that one comes not in the sense of censorship. It

⁵ Abba Kyari was a highly influential chief of staff to former Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari. He died of COVID-19 complications in April 2020.

comes in the form of editing. Anything you know is controversial or is not factual. You first of all, in editing it, cut it off.

By taking this pre-emptive measure to remove potentially controversial content, journalists/editors subconsciously subscribe to what Tuchman (1972, p.661) refers to as a ritualistic strategy to 'anticipate attack or defensively deflect criticism.' The presence of a perceived independence by participants is significant to the journalistic watchdog role. While journalists do not simply accept government's claims about its anticorruption efforts at face value, what we find is that there is a façade of independence by journalists, which is likely to weaken public trust in the media and its fuels cynicism towards anti-corruption efforts. This façade of independence is impacted by self-censorship, editorial control and external pressures. Although elite journalists portray an image of independence, ownership influence can result in suppression of some stories and invariably, this suggests that the public is likely to get an incomplete picture of the anticorruption fight, detrimental to journalistic quality.

Access versus narratives

Many journalists/editors and those in the managerial cadre report limited or restricted access to information in covering corruption cases. Even though there were substantial number of news items that are designated as neutral as indicated from the content analysis in figure 2, journalists note that it is difficult to get government agencies to speak up or provide documents. Participant 24 of *Premium Times* explains:

Agencies set up to fight corruption only dish out what they want the people to know. Nigerian government officials see journalists- especially ethical journalists as enemies who are trying to dabble into their business which, they believe, should be rightly conducted in the dark and therefore find it extremely unnecessary to give information to the media.

What this suggests is that there is an inherent dependence on anti-corruption agencies by journalists for information subsidies. Similarly, Participant 15, deputy editor of the *Thisday* newspaper commented on the arms deal corruption case:

As journalists, we were not allowed access to the suspects. More often than not, we have to rely on press statement issued by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission which

expectedly was usually one-sided. The situation got a little better when the suspect was charged to court, we were able to report the charges filed and the accused person's response to the charges...

Due to this restricted access (and lack of transparency) fuels suspicion, complicating public understanding of the truth of the anticorruption war. Content analysis indicates that in covering the arms deal, *ThisDay* used witch-hunting and democracy/rule of law frames as part of its journalistic response to the situation, implying a politically motivated attack on individuals accused of corruption. Frequently, the newspaper cited the pronouncement of judges who gave rulings in favour of the accused. As chairman of the *Vanguard* editorial board, stated, '*Dasuki could be a dress rehearsal for a re-launch of 1984 reign of terror on our collective civil liberties disguised as a fight against corruption.*' A notable difference between *The Nation* which frequently aligns with the government's anti-corruption agenda and other newspapers is that *The Nation* tends to leave out the witch-hunt narrative, suggesting a close working relationship between the newspaper and anti-corruption agencies. As Participant 8 puts it:

If you ask anybody in Nigeria today, The Nation is the only newspaper in the vanguard of the anticorruption agenda of the government; we are, apart from another online medium, Premium Times. But for the traditional media, we can beat our chests that we are leading. Infact recently, former Vice-President Atiku⁶ Abubakar, declared The Nation as a wing of EFCC. So, you can see the extent to which we have been recognize d, they essentially call us the extension of the EFCC.

Considering *The Nation's* close relationship with anti-corruption agencies, it raises concerns for its independence and the narratives it may influence; yet, at the core of the concerns lies a mistrust between journalists and anti-corruption agencies, even though security agencies were often viewed as extensions of the executive branch, adding to the feelings/narratives that corruption was not seriously combated. Given the important influence of morality in government corruption discourse, anticorruption agencies should enhance support for

⁶ Atiku Abubakar was presidential candidate for the main opposition political party in 2019 and in 2023 presidential elections.

journalists as they attempt to report on corrupt practices. This can be achieved through the conscientious demonstration of transparency, accountability and openness in their communication strategies (Byrne, et al, 2010).

Navigating Adversity

Participants generally agree that well-funded professional reporting has declined over the years and the consequent engagement in unethical behaviour. Journalists in the field express concern about insufficient funding for journalistic investigations as media owners are not forthcoming. This phenomenon, as echoed by participants is akin to a 'modern-day slavery' that psychologically tortures those who wish to practice journalism and report professionally. As an illustration, a group of journalists from the Daily Newswatch Newspapers, Newswatch Magazine and National Mirror Newspapers, all based in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, stormed a corporate event in Abuja in January 2016, protesting 13 months of unpaid salaries against the publisher of the titles, Mr Jimoh Ibrahim. As a retaliatory measure, Bolu Afolayan, Managing Director of the companies, was fired on the spot by the publisher. This scenario was captured on live television (Awojobi, 2016). Six months later, the owner of *ThisDay* Newspaper titles and Arise TV Network, dismissed 13 employees following a strike notice they had sent earlier in order to force the management to clear backlogs of unpaid salaries. These are sufficient to cow down other future protesters among journalists.

Two years before, the New Nigerian Compass management instituted a policy mandating journalists to submit two pages of paid advertisement per month, as a condition to receiving their salary (Ezeamalu, 2014). That was crossing the Chinese wall so to speak! Journalists are poorly remunerated which is directly related to some of them engaging in unethical behaviour. Some participants echoed this phenomenon as still lingering on. Obviously, this is a challenge to the professional coverage of corruption news. In light of this, it is crucial to recognize the efforts of online newspapers like Premium Times, which produces coverage and programming on issues supported by international philanthropic organizations and has adopted a mixed model of revenue generation that strengthens its investigative reporting capability. According to Participant 22 of *Premium Times*:

We are really distasteful of routine reporting. We think reporting must as a matter of fact, provide investigative and evidential basis or support for all claims that they make, that I will say, makes us a departure from the mainstream reporting culture.

Further, interviewees noted a tendency for superficial reporting on corruption, which was attributed to both limited resources and time constraints. As Participant 17 underscores this challenge noting, *'A lot of us have many beats, so what you do is, as it breaks you report. However, to have that time to start following up on a story to see its conclusion...we do not have that luxury.'* Similarly, Participant 13 of the *Daily Trust* pointed out that this pattern of neglecting follow-up investigations in favour of new scandals perpetuates a cycle of forgetfulness. *'That is why you see most times, after the first and second reports, nobody bothers....another scandal comes out, and you forget about that other one.'* This finding provides empirical evidence that aligns with Adebawale's (2013, p.87) argument, wherein he posits that the Nigerian print media's focus on immediate and episodic challenges overshadows its commitment to addressing profound, enduring socio-political and economic transformations. He contends that the press's prowess lies in combating short-term obstacles rather than engaging in the protracted struggles that underpin fundamental societal change. Also mentioned by them, other challenges they face when covering anti-corruption stories had to do with security threats (arrests and intimidation), the fear of costly and time-consuming libel suits resulting from unsubstantiated reports, which makes them hesitant to do exclusive corruption stories. Some interviewees shared their experiences: a *Daily Trust* journalist asked an ex-Minister question pertaining to accountability and the latter erupted into an invective rage and intimidated the reporter who was forced to apologise. On another occasion, Participants 22 and 25 of *Premium Times* were arrested by police on orders from Nigerian Army leadership for criminal defamation. The police urged the media outlet and the military to resolve the matter out of court following the arrests. Despite this, the online publication claims to stand by its story and instead asked the military to apologise for threatening the publication and its journalists. These insights gleaned from participants' experiences illuminate the challenges they face and the way in which they view the fight against corruption.

Conclusion

In journalistic practice in Nigeria, the perception of the war against corruption by journalists is often shaped by a constructed narrative that prioritises the interests of political and media elites. There are key frames in this narrative-judicial, corruption, democracy/rule of law, witch-hunt and disaffirmation-that play a pivotal role in shaping the discursive narrative about corruption and the fight against it. Although there is a prevailing negative portrayal of individuals accused of corruption, in the frame-setting process, journalists tend not to accept government's claims about its anticorruption efforts at face value since they often operate with a Western ideal of accountability at heart. However, factors such as media ownership, organisational constraints, and limited resources, can influence journalists' frames of reference, making them less likely to dominate the news framing processes.

While media owners may promote their commitment to unfettered reporting, the lived experiences of journalists demonstrate a nuanced autonomy, often subject to editorial control, self-censorship, and external pressures. Journalists, then, must maintain a silence of the graveyard. Whoever raises his voice against the institution is relieved of his job with reckless abandon. How would the journalist not cut corner? It follows that these factors can lead to superficial reporting and many may play a devil's advocate to earn their living by legitimising acts of corruption through the use of technicalities, rule of law, or accusation of government anti-corruption drive to be targeted to oppositions. Their not earning their legitimate wages makes corruption to beget corruption. Journalistic roles in reporting on and combating corruption requires a deep understanding of these complexities.

While press freedom is crucial for effective journalism in combating corruption, it is important to acknowledge that when journalists are compelled to rely on information subsidies from anti-corruption agencies, it can introduce a potential bias in news coverage for or against the government. Nonetheless, the intrinsic worth of these narratives lies in their ability to spark societal reforms, which is the essence of watchdog journalism.

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