INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM, CORRUPTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Ezekiel S. Asemah and Chika Asogwa
Department of Mass Communication, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria
E-mail: asemahezekiel@yahoo.com, +234-803-5053-713

Abstract
A free, aggressive, open and bold press is part of the spiritual core of a democracy in any part of the world. In the world we are living today, investigative journalism is becoming a significant part in our daily lives, as it informs, unleashes and reveals to us, the happenings in our community, society, government and in the country. Investigative journalism is critical to the advancement and preservation of a country’s democratic institutions and way of life and in helping to catalyse equitable development. Thus, the study focuses on how to curb corruption in Nigeria, through investigative journalism, so as to engender development at all levels. The study adopts the survey research method, employing the focus group discussion as an instrument of data collection. The data gathered and analysed shows that investigative journalism has a very crucial role to play in the fight against corruption in Nigeria, which will in turn, lead to sustainable development. Findings show that the press has an important role to play in strengthening democratic governance, promoting awareness and keeping a check on corrupt practices and the misuse of government power. Findings also show that certain factors hinder the effective practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria. The factors, among others, include: proprietorial interference, repressive press laws, political interference, media gate keepers, economic constraints, technological limitations and limited access to information. Based on the findings, the study concludes that investigative journalism is key to fighting corruption in Nigeria, but the extent to which it is used to fight corruption in Nigeria is minimal. Based on the conclusion, the paper, among others, recommends that the investigative journalist should be allowed to have free access to information so that journalism can be used to expose corruption, so as to bring about sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Investigative, journalism, corruption, democracy and development

Introduction
The politicians and those in public life need to be held accountable. Journalists and journalism play an essential role in this process; identifying lies, hypocrisy, corruption and outright law breaking. Neither the public nor the police can do this by themselves. Robust and independent journalism is therefore, an essential part of democratic life. Investigative journalism is essential to a functioning democracy (Cooper, 2009). Investigative journalism is a key to democratic governance and national development for developing countries. Investigative journalism has over the years helped uncovered some corrupt conducts, which has been costing nations huge sums of money and transform the credibility of many media houses. Investigations by journalists into the conduct of those who hold power are essential to a fully functioning democracy.

Alawode (2009) avers that corruption is a worldwide phenomenon as elements of corruption are found in almost all countries of the world today, but the incidences of corruption are much more prevalent in developing countries, including Nigeria. As noted by Anderson (1999), cited in Alawode (2009), the conditions of these countries are such that corruption is likely to have different causes and consequences than in more developed countries. The socio-economic conditions in low income countries are more conducive to the growth of corruption. Corruption is a symptom of deep-rooted economic and political weaknesses and shortcomings in the legislative and judicial system of the country. To aggravate the situation,
accountability in these countries is generally weak, the chances of being caught are small and the penalties when caught, are light. Indeed, the major reason for this sorry level of the nation’s development could be easily traced to the high incidence of corruption in the country. Free press is not a luxury; a free press is at the absolute core of equitable development, because if you cannot enfranchise poor people, if they do not have a right to expression, if there is no searchlight on corruption and inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus needed to bring about change (Alawode 2009). This perhaps explains why Stapenhurst (2000) argues that corruption is a negative factor, which must not be allowed to grow. Stapenhurst further avers that available evidence shows that if corruption is not contained, it will grow. Once a pattern of successful bribe is institutionalised, corrupt officials have an incentive to demand larger bribes, engendering a culture of illegality that in turn, breeds market inefficiency. Alyeta (2011) avers that corruption permeates all levels of government in Nigeria, from the legislative and judicial branches, to the police and civil service. This has led to a widespread loss of faith in the public sector which, if left unaddressed, will undermine confidence in democracy as a viable system of government. As the fourth estate of political life, the press should be responsible for holding state institutions and government accountable to the people.

The foregoing shows that corruption is an evil, which must be combated as fiercely as possible, with all the resources available. The press must be in the forefront in this fight. This is because, the media generally, are the watch dogs of the society and they always throw their search light on the happenings in the society. Thus, this paper examines the place of investigative journalism in the fight against corruption in Nigeria, so as to bring about social change.

Corruption is a cancer that has eaten deep into the Nigerian system. Nigeria is rated very high in global corruption index. The resultant effect of corruption is that no serious investors will be attracted to come and invest in a corruption ridden environment. Corruption, as it were, negatively impact on the development of a nation. This is because when there is high rate of corruption in a nation, the money meant for development purposes will be used for personal aggrandisement.

In a corrupt system, characteristics such as infrastructural decay, lack of patriotism, subjugation of collective interests, improper implementation of policies and programmes and a disconnect between vision and its realisation are prevalent. So, for Nigeria hoping to become one of the 20 most developed economies in the world by the year 2020, the fight against corruption must be one of the topmost priorities of the Government at all levels and investigative journalism has a crucial role to play in this fight. Instructively, it has been noted by scholars that the position of Nigeria as the sixth largest exporter of oil in the world is a big contradiction to the unacceptable level of poverty and squalor in the land.

Thus, the problem the study seeks to investigate is the place of investigative journalism in the fight against corruption in Nigeria and how it can engender development in Nigeria. This forms the basis of the research exercise.

Objectives of the study

The study has the following objectives:

a. to find out whether investigative journalism has any role to play in fighting against corruption in Nigeria;

b. to ascertain the factors that militate against the use of investigative journalism for fighting corruption in Nigeria;

c. to ascertain whether investigative journalism is relevant to the development efforts in Nigeria; and

D. to offer useful recommendations on how investigative journalism can be best practised to fight corruption in Nigeria.

Theoretical perspectives

Three theories have been chosen to provide the theoretical frame work for the study; they are: agenda setting theory, source credibility theory and the media gate keeping theory.

Agenda setting theory

The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972/1973. The major assumption of the theory is that the media set
agenda for the public to follow. The theory holds that most of the pictures we store in our heads, most of the things we think or worry about, most of the issues we discuss, are based on what we have read, listened to or watched in different mass media. The media make us to think about certain issues, make us to think or feel that certain issues are more important than others in our society (Asemah, 2011). Wimmer and Dominick (2006) observe that the theory on agenda setting by the media proposes that the public agenda or what kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicise. This means that if the news media choose to give the most time and space to corruption, it will become the most important item on the audiences’ minds. The implication of the theory is that the media can focus on the issue of corruption in Nigeria, and the people will pay attention to it, since most of the things that members of the society worry about are the issues raised by the media.

Gate keeping theory
It describes the regulation of the flow of information in the media. The theory was propounded by Kurt Lewin in 1947. The theory assumes that the media select what to emphasise and what to de-emphasise. The term “gate keeping” according to McQuail (2005:308) has been widely used as a metaphor to describe the process by which selections are made in media works, especially decisions regarding, whether or not, to allow a particular news report to pass through the gates of a news medium into the news channels. McQuail further notes that the term has a wider potential application, since it can apply to the work of literary agents and publishers and to many other kinds of editorial and production works in print and electronic media. Gate keeping applies to decision about distribution and marketing of existing media products. Put more succinctly, gate keeping refers to the power to give or withhold access to different voices in society and it is often a locus of conflict. This means that some media topics are chosen to be presented to different audiences through different forms of media. The gate keeper decides which information will go forward and which will not. The implication of the theory on the study is that the news media should select stories that will expose corruption, as this will go a long way in curbing corruption and bringing about development in Nigeria.

Problems of investigative in the fight against corruption in Nigeria
The factors that serve as hindrances to investigative journalism in the fight against corruption in Nigeria, as identified by Asemah (2012 are:

i. **Proprietorial interference:** This is the problem of ownership interest. This is a problem that often arise from the interference of the owners of the media house. There are instances when media owners determine what should be reported to the public. The owners of a media house have influence not just by direct intervention or by establishing lines that cannot be crossed; they set the tone, they decide which markets to target, they control editorial budgets and they hire and fire their editors, who are their representatives in the media world. This perhaps explains why Osungbohun (1995) avers that media proprietors in Nigeria make maximum use of their positions to boost their selfish interests. They can use their positions to harass and even dismiss vibrant journalists, who fail to toe their line. This is done under the guise of reorganisation and rationalisation.

ii. **Media gate keepers:** Gate keeping is a term that describes the regulation of the flow of information. The gatekeeper is the person who decides what passes through each gate section, of which, in any process, there are several. The gate keeper decides which information will go forward and which will not. In other words, a gate keeper in a social system decides which of a certain commodity, materials, goods and information, may enter the system. Important to realise is that gate keepers are able to control the public’s knowledge of the actual events by letting some stories pass through the system, but keeping others out.

iii. **Political interference:** The government may feel the need to close down media houses that employ probing investigative journalists. In extreme situations, the licence of the media house may be seized by the government thus, putting several journalists jobless. This implies that the political dispensation in question determines the kind of stories to report. The political situation in any given nation determines the communication
behaviour of the citizens, including the journalists. According to Yaroson and Asemah (2008:18), cited in Asemah (2011), the political arrangement in any given society goes a long way in determining the communication behaviour of its members.

iv. **Economic constraints**: The economic climate that pervades a country also determines the communication behaviour of its people. A buoyant and a growing economy with a comfortable standard of living for her citizens, will also have positive impact on the communication industry in the society. The availability and proliferation of channels of mass communication will, under normal circumstances, increase or decrease in direct proportion with the fortunes of the economy.

v. **Technological limitations**: Technology is a key factor in modern communication strategies. Communication technology has greatly advanced from the invention of paper ink by the Chinese in about AD 105 and the introduction of Gutenberg press, to present day computers and satellite systems. Modern mass communication technologies have become useful as tools for political enlightenment, social mobilisation, educational instruction and community participation in national life. More importantly, access to these technologies provide relative advantage to those who possess them in the area of political and business competition.

vi. **Limited access to information**: Freedom of information as a concept describes the opportunity of both the media and the citizenry of a nation to have maximum access to information of both, public and private institutions. The major principle of freedom or access to information, as noted by Rodney, in Okon and Udoudo (2010:2), is that information generally belongs to the citizenry and that people create the government, which amasses the information, hence, the information belongs to the public and each person is entitled at all times, to complete information about the affairs of government and the official acts of public officials and employees. The Nigerian investigative journalist has limited access to official archives and records. Sometimes, official archives are incomplete, poorly-maintained and subject to tough official secrets or privacy laws, often left over from the colonial era.

vii. **Threats to life**: In the course of investigating issues of relevance within a society, the journalist is often faced and exposed to various hazards and dangers. According to Osungbohun (1995), the Committee to Protect Journalist in 1991 reported that there were 1262 cases of attacks against journalists out of this number, 267 of the cases were recorded in Africa.

viii. **Repressive press laws**: There is a slew of laws to stop an investigative journalist in his tracks. Investigative journalists in Nigeria tread on murky waters of repressive laws, hence they find it extremely difficult investigating those in authority. A host of draconian and restrictive laws governing the media industry act as prohibitive catalysts against investigative reporting. These include: the Official Secret Act, the Seditious Offence Ordinance, the Criminal Code, etc. Those in power hate investigating reports as it shows them up. So, the next best thing to do is to cripple the journalists with draconian laws and create a docile media industry. As noted by Koh Stanley (n.d), investigative journalism provides the checks and balances, but sadly in many countries, it is still at its infant stage, due to these repressive press laws.

ix. **Bad working conditions**: When the investigative journalist is not motivated, he is likely not to take his job seriously. The journalist who is not well paid is likely to be unethical. He might be tempted to collect brown envelope, free gifts, so as to make ends meet. In this way, it becomes a problem to investigative journalism.

xi. **Greed and corrupt practices by journalists**: There is widespread corruption within the media. Some journalists accept bribes to cover specific stories or extort public officials. No matter the amount of money a greedy man has, he is not satisfied. So, as a result of greed, most investigative journalists go against the ethics of journalism.

**Methodology**

The study adopted the survey research method, employing the focus group discussion as an instrument of data collection. The population was made up of journalists in the print and electronic media in Jos metropolis. The sample size was thirty (30) respondents, who cut across print and
electronic media in Jos. The purposive sampling was used to select the media houses while the simple random sampling was used to select the thirty (30) journalists who were interviewed in groups. The discussants, ranging in groups, from five (5) to six (6) were first adequately briefed on the purpose of the research and the focus group discussion process. Then, the researcher (moderator), using FGD discussion guide and a tape recorder, asked guided questions while allowing discussants to discuss freely.

Results, findings and discussion
Findings show that investigative journalism plays a very crucial role in the fight against corruption in any country. Investigative journalism, as noted by the majority of the discussants exposes corruption in high and low places and this tends to deter others who wish to carry out corrupt practices in the society. Based on the findings, the society needs investigative journalism for several reasons, one of which is to fight corruption; a country where there is no investigative journalism will surely experience a lot of corruption. This perhaps explains why Asemah (2012) avers that investigative journalism has certain aims and objectives and some of the aims and objectives, as observed by Asemah (2012) are:

- People have a right to know about the society in which they live. They have a right to know about decisions which may affect them, even if people in power want to keep them secret.

- People in power, whether in government, the world of commerce or any other group in society, can abuse that power. They can be corrupt, steal money, break laws and do all sorts of things, which harm other people. They might just be incompetent and unable to do their jobs properly. They will usually try to keep this knowledge secret. Journalists try to expose such abuses.

- Journalists also have a duty to watch how well people in power perform their jobs, especially those who have been elected to public offices. Journalists should constantly ask whether such people are keeping their election promises. Politicians and others who are not keeping their promises may try to hide the fact; journalists should try to expose it.

Through investigative reports, corruption in high and low places can be exposed. Journalists can monitor corruption and report them. This will in a way make government accountable and transparent in their dealings. The press, through investigative journalist, can check the excesses of public office holders. Public office holders are kept on their toes and held accountable through investigative reports. The media are seen as credible when they expose corruption in the society, expose injustice, reveal the negative effects of government policies and actions on the people. When the job of investigative journalism is well carried out, the members of the public tend to reposit more confidence in the media. People tend to look at the media as a means that can be used to fight injustice and other social vices in the society when the work of investigative is well done.

On the factors that hinder the use of investigative journalism for fighting corruption in Nigeria, the respondents identified several factors. The discussants identified press laws, official secret acts, constitutional challenge, corruption among the journalists, ownership influence, unprofessionalism and lack of principles on the part of the investigative journalists as a threat to the practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria. These factors are however in line with the ones observed in the literature review. For example, the official secret act serves as the comprehensive legislation on the restriction on access to Nigeria government-held information and it concerns itself with the prevention of spying and sabotaging the nation’s strategic installations. Section 1 of the Act makes it an offence for any person to transmit any classified matter to a person to whom he is not authorised on behalf of the government. It is also an offence under this section, for any person without being authorised by government to obtain, reproduce or retain any classified matter. Also, a public officer who fails to comply with any instructions given to him on behalf of government, as to the safekeeping of any classified matters, which by virtue of his office is obtained by him or under his control, is guilty of an offence of the Act.
When a journalist comes in contact with a classified document and publishes it, he is prima-facie liable for the offence.

More so, in most cases, the owners of the media houses dictate what the media should report. This perhaps explains why Akinyele (2003) avers that there is the tendency to always want to please the power that be or fingers that feed the media practitioner to the detriment of development ideals. There is the popular saying that “he who plays the piper dictates the tune.”

The discussants agreed that investigative journalism is very crucial to development efforts in every nation, this is because it contributes to political, educational, social, economic and cultural development. When there is sound investigative journalism, there will be transparency and this in turn, leads to development at every level. The centrality of the media in contemporary democracies makes political elites sensitive to news, particularly to "bad" news that often causes a public commotion. The publication of news about political and economic wrongdoings can trigger congressional and judicial investigations. In cases when government institutions fail to conduct further inquiries or investigations are plagued with problems and suspicions, investigative journalism can contribute to accountability by monitoring the functioning of these institutions. It can examine how well these institutions actually fulfil their constitutional mandate to govern responsibly in the face of press reports that reveal dysfunction, dishonesty or wrongdoing in government and society. At minimum, investigative reporting retains important agenda-setting powers to remind citizens and political elites about the existence of certain issues. Investigative journalism also contributes to democracy by nurturing an informed citizenry. Information is a vital resource to empower a vigilant public that ultimately holds government accountable through voting and participation. With the ascent of media-centred politics in contemporary democracies, the media have eclipsed other social institutions as the main source of information about issues and processes that affect citizens’ lives.

**Conclusion**

Investigative journalism, which has to do with exposing what people hide in the society has a crucial role to play in the fight against corruption. It also contributes a great deal to development in Nigeria. Journalism should serve the common good and should contribute solutions. Investigative journalism connects human beings and should serve all those involved, individually and collectively, as well as, organisations that are acting for the common good. Findings from the focus group discussion shows that investigative journalism encourages transparency in the government sector. The media are popularly acclaimed to be agents of information dissemination in every modern society. They disseminate information about the happenings in the society, so as to make people to be aware of such things. The media, which are seen as the agents of information dissemination, therefore have a key role to play in the fight against corruption.

Investigative journalism can lead to government that is more accountable and responsive to its citizens’ needs. In the real world, the media play an important role in democracy. This is because the citizens get much of their information from the media, whether print or electronic. This piece of information they get from the media play a very crucial role in selecting which piece of information to communicate to the public and in adding credibility to information provided through other sources. However, certain factors hinder effective practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria; namely: lack of technology, media gate keepers, ownership influence, etc. Based on the findings therefore, the paper concludes that investigative journalism is crucial to the fight against corruption in Nigeria and that certain factors do not allow the journalists to carry out these function effectively. Thus, the extent to which investigative journalism is used to fight corruption in Nigeria is minimal.

**Recommendations**

Based on the conclusion of the study, the paper recommends that:

i. Investigative journalists should be allowed to freely express themselves on issues of public interests. Freedom of information involves the right of the people to know the whole truth and also, it compels the disclosure of government affairs, as
well as, matters of public interest. It forbids relevant public information being hidden from public knowledge or being kept under carpets to protect personal interests. Freedom of information lays emphasis on transparency, responsibility, responsiveness, good conduct, due process, openness and accountability of government and public officers to the people.

ii. Only free access by journalists to information is not sufficient for writing investigative reports, but investigative journalism is realised only when it is possible for them to publish investigative reports, which frequently include shocking and disclosing information. To fight corruption effectively, investigative journalists should be allowed to publish their stories without any form of restraint.

iii. One of the most important pre-conditions for investigative journalism is existence of laws to protect news sources of journalists. This is a cornerstone of freedom of press. In investigative journalism and after publication of such reports, people who are threatened by the reports may try to put pressure on journalists to disclose their sources.

iv. Journalists themselves should shun corruption, so that they will be able to operate successfully. A journalist who is corrupt cannot effectively carry investigative journalism.

References


