PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES TO THE WATCHDOG FUNCTION OF THE MEDIA IN NIGERIA

EMMANUEL OMULA (PHD)
DEPARTMENTAL OF MASS COMMUNICATION, TOPFAITH UNIVERSITY, AKWA IBOM STATE,
omulas@yahoo.com

ROSELINE OGBOLE (PHD)
BEYOND DEVELOPMENT FOR AFRICA'S YOUTH, ADVANCEMENT INITIATIVE,
myrose4me2000.roo@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT
The study sought to find out the challenges to the watchdog function of the media, and the impact of these challenges on democracy and the people. The study is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory of the Press. Library Research Method was employed to generate secondary data for the study. The study has shown that the media as a watchdog of the society cannot achieve desired result in Nigeria, because our institutions are weak, compromised or corrupt and power does not reside in the people. This means that, no matter how the media try to ensure accountability in government it can hardly succeed when our institutions are weak and compromised. The study has also shown that, weak institutions and the fact that power does not reside in the electorates, is gradually paving way for kakistocracy and centralization of power. This means that the Executive arm (President) is becoming too powerful. This is true in that findings revealed that, the Supreme Court in Nigeria will never remove a sitting President, however deeply flawed his election may be, because the judiciary is weak and corrupt. Again it was revealed that, INEC deliberately rigged the 2023 Presidential Elections because Amazon that was engaged to provide technical support said, there was no glitch with the result viewing portals on February 2023. This shows that both INEC and the Judiciary are weak and compromised. Institutions of the state will continue to remain weak and useless until people who work in such institutions do the right thing. Findings revealed that, both public and private media owners have a lot of influence on the media they operate and these owners, have used their media organizations to: influence public opinion, which is also another form of impediment to the watchdog role of the media It was concluded that, the watchdog function of the media cannot bring about the desired

accountability, good governance and dividends of democracy in a country where the institutions are weak and power does not reside in the electorates .It was recommended that heads of the various institutions of the state should not be appointed by the President and our institutions must be allowed to function without fear or favour.

Introduction

In countries where power resides in the electorates and the institutions of the state are independent and active, the media is seen achieving its full potential as the watchdog of the society, and democracy also thrives in such countries. The unofficial title of" the fourth estate of the realm of government" was ascribed to the media because of its function as the watchdog of the society. This position is consented to by, Paranthaman (2015) who notes that, the media share equal important function with the other arms of government in maintaining good governance and healthy environment for business, and is referred to as the watchdog function. The watchdog function of the media centres on investigative journalism that is intended to expose corruption, or expose the malfeasance of our political elites and or illegality that are capable of truncating growth and development in a democratic society. Little wonder, Wikipedia (nd) states that, it is a type of investigative journalism that ensures accountability in democracy interviewing politicians and other public figures and cross checking facts from sure interview for the purpose of accountability.

Hitherto, the media as the watchdog of the society cannot ensure accountability and good governance in countries like Nigeria where the institutions are weak, or compromised. This assertion is echoed in Akinyetun (2022) who opines that, countries with weak institutions are associated with weak laws. The role of the media as a watchdog is to expose ills in the society. After that, it is then left for the institutions or institution concerned to correct the identified ills, by doing the needful. The media do not have the power to sanction corrupt individuals neither do the media have the power to take to trial such individuals. The need for the watchdog function of the media is echoed in Onabajo (2020) who states that, the media serve the people's right to know and also holds the government accountable to the people. However, the power of the media in Nigeria to hold government accountable is challenged by the fact that our institutions are weak, and the fact that, power does not reside in the electorates. The media can only expose corruption but do not have the power or authority to punish offenders. The power to punish is vested in the institutions of the state, that are weak or compromised.

A number of studies have been conducted on the watchdog role of the media. However, these studies did not take into cognizance the impediments to the watchdog role of the media. .Karadimittrious, Von Kogh, Rugiero, Biacalana, Bomba & Lo (2022) in the study," Journalism and the Watchdog Role of News Media: Between Acute Challenges and Exceptional Counter Balances". Sought to find out the extent to which news media perform their watchdog role appropriately..The "gap in this study is that, the researchers did look at the impediments to the watchdog role of the media. In the study, "Assessing the Media's Role in Ensuring the Accountability of the Nigeria Government", the researchers, Amodu, Yartey, Ekanem, Oresanya and Afolabi (2016). Investigated the performance of the watchdog role of the media in relation to accountability. The gap in this study is that, the watchdog role of the media cannot ensure accountability when the institutions of the state are weak and power does not reside in the people. The current study is different from previous studies because it looked at impediments to the functionality of the watchdog role of the media. The watchdog function is to expose ills in government, correcting such ills, is the responsibility of the institutions of the state. However, the institutions appear to be weak and compromised. Weak instructions arrogate such much power to the Executive arm (President) Little wonder a sage of yore once said, power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. The watchdog role of the media is to ensure that leaders do not deviate from the

tenets of democracy in the discharge of their functions. This study investigates challenges to the watchdog function of the media in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory of the press. The theory is traced to Walter Lippmann. Asemah, Nwammuo,& Nkwa –Uwaoma (2017) state that, "Lippmann argued that, the mass media are the principal connection between events in the world and the images in the mind of the public.. Without using the term agenda setting Lipmann was talking about what we today call agenda setting(p,73-74)".The theory was formerly developed by Maxwell McCombs & Donald Shawn in 1968. Agenda Setting Theory according to Communication Theory (nd) has to do with the media giving utmost importance to a specific issue, so as to give the audience the impression that, certain news is the most important .The selected news report comes as the heading or is covered frequently for some time. Agenda setting theory also refers to how editors, journalists and broadcasters prioritise and filter what to include and what not to include in the news (Chapman 2001).Agenda Setting Theory proposes that, the public agenda or the kind of things people discuss, think and worry about is powerfully shaped and directed by what the media choose to publicize (Wimmer & Dominick in Asemah et al 2017)Little wonder Folarin (1998) opines that, the theory connotes that, the mass media predetermine what issues are considered important at any given time in a society; this does not mean that the media have the power to determine what we actually think about. This means that, the media can only bring issues to our attention but cannot compel us to think about such issue. This position is echoed in Ijwo & Omula (2014) who state that, the media are powerful enough to set agenda but the audiences are free to either work with the agenda or no.

The media according to Folarin (1998,p.66) can set agenda in the following ways

- The quantity or frequency of reporting
- Prominence given to the reports – through headline display, picture and layout of newspapers
- The degree of conflict generated by the report

The cumulative specific media effects over time

The media can set agenda by reporting a particular event again and again, with the specific aim of drawing peoples' attention to such event, so as to make such event public agenda. This what is referred to as quantity or frequency of report

The media can set agenda by allowing that issue they want people to be aware of occupy the front pages of their publication. Sometimes, such issues come as banner headlines, so as to attract readers' attention to it. This means that, such event or news is given prominence over others.

The power of television in setting agenda as encapsulated in the in the words of Ebo in Ijwo & Omula(2014) is that, television offers debates and discussions on agenda and gains credibility of purpose by selecting personalities that really have the expertise to handle the topics, there by not only making the viewers aware of the idea it is perpetuating, but also making the viewers feel they have some sense of importance too, because they now know..

Then media according to Ijwo & Omula can also set agenda in the following ways:

- Framing—this means that the importance and the interpretation people attach to potential items on public agenda are strongly influenced by how the media present news stories
- Priming—priming implies drawing attention to certain issues even in a neutral manner.
- Salience Transfer—refers to the capacity of the media (or other authors) to influence the relative importance individuals attach to issues.

The assumption of agenda setting theory according to Ijwo & Omula(2014) are:

McCombs and Shaw believe that the media have the ability to transfer the salient item on their news agenda to public agenda

Agenda setting theory boasted of two attractive features; it reaffirmed the power of the press while maintaining that, individuals were free to choose,

The press and television can cause audience ego involvement in the issue to rise and fall in response to media emphasis.

The theory predicts a cause and effect relationship between media content and voters' perception.

The relevance of this theory to this study lies in the fact that, Agenda Setting Theory is also known as the agenda setting function of the media. It is through this function that the watchdog role of the media is made visible. This means that, the media can draw audience attention to ills in the society through its agenda setting function by constantly featuring such issue or event in the media. This is true in that, Chenkhinwee (2024) posits that, the media can constantly feature a particular event or issue in the news, thereby creating a sense of urgency about the issue or event. Again, the theory is in align with the topic in that, the theory has shown that the media in trying to ensure accountability can only bring issues of corruption to public notice. This is so because the theory believes that, the media can only set agenda but cannot force people to act on the agenda. It also connotes that with weak institutions and power not residing in the electorates, exposing corruption and ills in government will amount to an exercise in futility

Objectives of the Study

i. To investigate challenges to the watchdog functions of the media in Nigeria.

ii. To ascertain the impacts of these challenges on democracy, and the people.

Literature Review

Challenges to the Watchdog Functions of the Media in Nigeria

The power to sanction offenders is vested in the various institutions of the state. If the media exposes the activities of corrupt officials, the power to arrest, question or convict such officials resides in the various institutions of the state like the police, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the judiciary and not the media. However, these institutions appear to be weak, compromised or loyal to the man at the helm of affairs (President) .So one of the challenges to the watchdog function of the media, is that our institutions are weak and compromised or loyal to the President. Akinyetun (2022) posits that, weak institutions are the bane of democracy in African, .Just recently, Nigerian government under the leadership of President Ahmed Bola Tinubu hiked electricity tariff across the nation from #65/kwh to #225 /kwh, which is over 200% increment. In their separate reactions to the hike, the House of Representative and the Nigerian Labour Congress according to Olawin, Tolu-kolawole & Adaji (2024) asked the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC) not to implement the new electricity tariff nationwide. However, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Power, Florence Eke, according to Olawin et al (2024) told the Punch on the 5th of May 2024 that, " the new tariff had come to stay and government would not yield to public pressure".

The point is that for a spokesperson to confidently tell the press that, government would not yield to public pressure, shows that she must be taking orders from somebody she believes is more powerful than the institutions and the people put together. The media has played its part by informing the people about the hike . The people had reacted by saying no to the hike, the House of Representative has made a mere pronouncement urging NERC not to implement the hike. The judiciary has not said anything. The Senate and House of Representative have the power to make NERC discontinue the hike if they really want to. They wouldn't do so because most of them are loyal to the President. The body language of the Senate and the judiciary show that , they are compromised or are not ready to do anything about the hike.. The implication of a compromised legislature is weak and poor legislations. This is true in that Akinyetun (2022) opines that, countries with weak institutions are associated with poor laws. This is so because in most cases the laws made by weak institutions are not always in the interest of the masses. The judiciary, the National Assembly and other institutions of government will continue to remain weak until they do the right thing. This assertion is echoed in Muritala (2023) who posits that, institutions will continue to remain

weak and useless until people who work in such institutions do what is right.. This is so in that those who manage the institutions are more powerful than the institutions.

Another impact of weak institutions is the fact that, it makes those in position of authority particularly the President appears to be more powerful than the institutions of the state. This means that such President or political elite(s) cannot be called to order by the institutions no matter what the media were able to expose about such individual(s). Such political elites are not afraid of what the media may say or expose about them, because they have the institutions that can sanction them, under their control. As such most of such leaders' act without regards to the law. Giving credence to the preceding point Muritala (2023) asserts that, former President Olusegun Obasanjo was known for always disobeying and ignoring orders of court. There is also the case of a former President spending without legislative approval. In 2018 the then President of Nigeria President Muhammad Buhari made advance payment for purchase of planes without Legislative approval. Giving credence to this point, Nwabughiogu (2018) notes that "It will be recalled that the President had made advanced payment on the aircraft from monies not appropriated for by National Assembly (Parag.3)".

Weak institution is further depriving the masses the opportunity to actually participate in the democratic process, of electing those to represent them. This is a challenge to democracy because, few powerful individuals can use the institutions to impose themselves or their opinions on the majority. This is so because after elections the decision to announce the winner(s) is vested in the institutions of the state and not the masses. The decision of a weak or compromised institution will not always reflect the view of the majority. This was the case with the 2023 Presidential Election result in Nigeria, that was believed not to reflect what transpired at the polls. The fact that INEC as institution is weak and compromised is captured in Odimegwu (2023) who observes that,

The failure of INEC result viewing portal (IReV) on election day was a betrayal many Nigerians did not predict or should have expected. It was a massive disappointment for many excited citizens who felt that the country would witness a transparent electoral process for the first time in a long time … In addition, INEC's manual tally of votes has been roundly panned for being riddled with errors.

As some election officers were reportedly corrupt during the process, it is not surprising that many Nigerians are questioning the integrity and authenticity of INEC's operation (P,7 &8)

It is glaring that INEC as an institution is weak and compromised, for the result viewing portal not to have worked on the day of election clearly showed that INEC had a hidden agenda. This is true because INEC had assured Nigerians that the technology would be used to ensure transparent election. INEC in the words of Odimegwu (2023) "assured Nigerians that the result transmission would and must be done using the BVAS (Bimodal voter Accreditation System). These assurances boosted residents' hope … in the possibility of a free and fair election (P,2)" To further buttressed the fact that INEC was compromised and weak Nnochiri(2023) asserts that Amazon a web Service that was engaged by INEC to provide technical support during the general elections, told the Presidential Election Petition Court that there was no technical glitch on February 25 2023. This shows that even the judiciary is also weak and compromised. The testimony of Amazon representative before The Presidential Election Petition Court shows how weak, corrupt and compromised the judiciary and the INEC have become .as institutions of the state.

The media through their watchdog functions were able to show to some extent that, the 2023 Presidential Election was rigged. However, the Judiciary failed in its function to ensure justices for those who sought redress in court. Weak institution and the fact that power does not reside in the electorates, is a huge blow to democracy as electorates are not allowed to actually participate in the democratic process. Democracy in the words of Day (2022) allows participation of citizen in charting the course of their government and their future. Participation can come in form of voting, public debate, town hall meetings and peaceful protest The implication is that with weak institutions the media and the people (electorates) are not allowed to chart the course of their government and their future. An election cannot be democratic until the people (electorates) are fully able to participate and are not prevented from exercising their choice (A C E nd)

A weak and compromised judiciary system further compounds the challenges to the watchdog function of the media . If INEC failed in her duty, the court can overrule INEC's decision so long as there is evidence to prove that INEC was wrong. This is why the court is said to be the last hope of the common man. Take away the powers of the institutions of the state and you render the watchdog function of the media meaningless. The Supreme Court judgment on the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria was a travesty of justice, that has tarnished the image of Nigeria before the world. This position is consented to by Fasan (2024) who posits that, it is clear that, Supreme Court cannot remove a sitting President irrespective of how deeply flawed his election may be. In the future any losing presidential candidate continued Fasan, who institutes an election petition will just be wasting his time. In further amplification of the fact that the judicial system of Nigeria is compromised Akanmidu (2018) opines that, is glaring that in Nigeria, there are corrupt judges. .The National Judicial Council in 2013 had to suspend and recommend for retirement two High Court judges for misconduct concerning corruption (Aknmidu 2022). The importance of an independent judiciary to the watchdog function of the media is aptly captured in Ostini (nd) who states that, the watchdog function of the media can result in the resignation of officials who are corrupt, and court proceedings that can create pathways to justice for victims. This shows that strong and viable institutions can guarantee accountability and transparency in governance as those who are found wanting will be sanctioned accordingly by the appropriate institutions.

Security agencies that are expected to protect lives and property of citizens and effect the arrest of corrupt individuals or officials are themselves corrupt and compromised. There is a lot of corruption among the various security agencies in Nigeria, this shows that these agencies are compromised. Such agencies cannot provide adequate security for journalists in the discharge of their primary responsibilities. Go to a police station where it is conspicuously displayed that bail is free, the police man will still demand that you pay money to bail people. Giving credence to the preceding point Titilola (2024) opines that, a Lagos based lawyer Olumide Sonupe went to the Moshalash Police Station in Alimosho Area on 30th December 2023 to bail his clien,. while the lawyer was talking to his client, the investigating police officer (IPO) came to the lawyer and demanded thirty thousand naira for bail, and that the money be transferred to the account of a POS vendor that she (IPO) was going to bring.

Cases abound of the police officers who are expected to protect the people conniving with or hiring their service riffle to armed robbers This is so in that, Obasanjo (2005) laments that Some robbers have been recruited into police. He maintained that, police hire out their guns to armed robbers. This is a very weighty allegation coming from a former military leader and a former President of Nigeria. Based on the assertion of former President Obasanjo it can be argued that some police officers now connive with armed robbers to rob citizens of their hard earned belongings. How then do you expect such police officers to arrest his/their " partners in crime"(armed robber).Such police officers would be the ones to tell the armed robber they are coming to arrest him. The watchdog function of the media cannot make meaningful impact when the security agencies are not doing their jobs the way they should. Democracy cannot thrive because a compromised security agency is bound to trample on the rights of law abiding citizens. A compromised security agency cannot provide adequate security for the media and that masses during elections simply put, a compromised security agency cannot guarantee the safety of citizens at all times.

Besides weak institution another challenge to the watchdog function of the media is the fact that power does reside in the people. Obasanjo according to Ogunnaike (2023) states that western liberal democracy is:

> "government of a few people over all the people or the population and these few people are representatives of only some of the people and not full representatives of all the people. Invariably, the majority of the people are wittingly or unwittingly kept out. (parag.3)".

This means that power does not reside in the Nigerian electorates. That power does not reside in the people shows that we are not actually practicing democracy, in the true sense of the word. This is so because true democracy in the words of Day (2022) allows participation of citizen in charting the course of their government and their future. Participation can come in form of voting, public debate, town hall

meetings and peaceful protest. When power does not reside in the people the people cannot actually participate in democracy, this so because they cannot choose leaders of their choice neither can they recall a leader who is found wanting in the performance of his duty. This is gradually leading us to kakistocracy rather than democracy.

Ownership influence and interest is another challenge that confronts the watchdog function of the media in Nigeria. When a media owner is interested in an issue he wants that interest to reflect in news stories about that thing. For instance, if the owner is interested in a political party or candidate he wouldn't want his media organization to carry "negative" news about such party or candidate, there by suppressing the objective views of journalists in his media organization. This is a huge challenge to the watchdog function of the media. This position is echoed in Project Reserve (nd) which states that, public media (government) are mostly used as instruments of propaganda for the government while private media owners are driven by different motives ranging from profit making, agenda setting to winning influence and political and business gain. Simply put, private media owners are mainly interested in propaganda or profit making. We are all living witnesses to the campaign of calumny by African Independent Television against Muhammad Buhari then Presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC). The documentary clearly depicted ownership influence and interest. The said documentary was aired January 2015, in African Independent Television (AIT). Little wonder Adelabu(2022), conducted a study and found out that, both public and private media owners have a lot of influence on the media they operate . These owners continued Adelabu, have used their media organizations to: influence public opinion, .to suppress the truth, denied opposing views access to the media, peddle false information, character assassination and to settle political scores.

Methodology

The study adopted the Library Research Method. This means, the study is based on secondary data. Library Research according to IGI Global (nd) refers to the act of using a library either in print or online, to find information which satisfies or answers a question. Giving credence to the preceding point Wikipedia (nd) states that, a research library is a library that contains in-depth collection of materials on one or several subjects. Research libraries are mainly established to carter for the research needs of researchers. Such libraries are usually stocked with authentic materials with quality contents (Wikipedia) in research library one is able to find scholarly and non-fiction materials such as: journals, newspapers, periodicals research projects etc. The implication is that the study is based on consultations of theoretically related studies carried out by other scholars. Conclusion and recommendations were made based on consultation of textbooks, journal articles and online materials.

Discuss

The first objective of this study was to investigate the challenges to the watchdog functions of the media in Nigeria. This is so because, previous studies underscored the extent to which the media were able to perform their watchdog functions. Findings have shown that weak institutions, ownership influence, corrupt security agencies and the fact that power does not reside in the people are challenges to the watchdog function of the media in Nigeria. These imply that the watchdog function of the media in ensuring accountability can make little or no impact when our institutions are weak and power does not reside in the people. It was revealed that the 2023 Presidential Election was not a true reflection of what transpired at the polls because INEC is weak compromised and corrupt. This is in line with the submission of Nnochiri (2023) who asserts that, Amazon a web Service that was engaged by INEC to provide technical support during the general elections, told the Presidential Election Petition Court that there was no technical glitch on February 25 2023. Furthermore, Odimegwu (2023) argues that "some election officers were reportedly corrupt during the process, it is not surprising that many Nigerians are questioning the integrity and authenticity of INEC's operation (P,7) "

It is glaring that weak institution is a challenge to the watchdog function of the media. The media for instance came up with plenty of reports on alleged irregularities in the conduct of the Presidential Election in Nigeria in 2023. Little wonder major contenders like Peter Obi and Atiku Abubakar had to respectively seek

redress in court. But the outcome of the court ruling was a travesty of justice. This assertion is echoed in Fasan (2024) who posits that, the Supreme Court in Nigeria cannot remove a sitting President irrespective of how deeply flawed his election may be. In further amplification of the fact that the judicial system of Nigeria is compromised Akanmidu (2018) opines that, there are many corrupt judges in Nigeria. The National Judicial Council in 2013 had to suspend and recommend for retirement two High Court judges for misconduct concerning corruption (Aknmidu 20220). One of the causes of weak institution is that the heads of these institutions are appointed by the President. As such they tend to be loyal to the President to the detriment of the general public. Ojoye (2017) opines that, an INEC Chairman is likely to have sympathy for the President that appointed him and when this happens we are not practicing genuine democracy.

The second objective of this study was to ascertain the impacts of these challenges on democracy, and and the people The implication of weak institutions on democracy is that it allows the abuse of powers by those in position of authority, and also making the opinion of few to supersede those of the majority. Weak institutions encourage corruption and discourage accountability. Weak institutions create room for selection rather than election. Weak institutions discourage foreign investment. Little wonder Akinyetun (2022) posits that, weak institutions are the bane of democracy in African. Again Akinyetun (2022) opines that, countries with weak institutions are associated with poor laws. This is so in that such laws in most cases are not in the interest of the masses but in the interest of money bags or the powers that be. Weak institutions in Nigeria have made the President so powerful that, he appears to have the final say in most matters , this is so because the power that is supposed to reside in the institutions and the electorates now resides in the President., This has accounted for widespread corruption among those within the corridors of power, this is true in that, the inordinate desire for money and the realization that power can deliver untold wealth is believed to be responsible for most corruption cases in Africa, as such the state and the people are sacrificed to greed (Liedong 2017)..

The impact of weak institution on the media is that it is an impediment to the watchdog function of the media. Simply put weak institutions, weaken the power of the media as the fourth estate of the realm of government, Once the media is able to expose corruption the relevant institutions are expected to take it up from there, by ensuring that offenders are punished accordingly. However the reverse is the case, hence the watchdog function of the media can achieve little or no result at all.

Concerns

i. That power does not reside in the people and that our institutions are weak compromised or inactive discourage investigative journalism (watchdog function). These have arrogated so much power to a particular arm of government, the Executive by extension the President.

ii. That power does not reside in the people and that our institutions are weak, compromised or inactive have made the opinions of few powerful individuals to supersede those of the majority. The electorates can hardly have a say in the affairs of government. For instance, the people are saying government should revert to old electricity tariff for those in band A but the government has refused to listen to the people. And the institutions cannot do anything either because they are weak compromised or corrupt. Nigerians are at the mercy of the President a fellow country man.

iii. Corruption will continue to thrive and kakistocracy will become the order of the day because those in position of authority are above the law and more powerful than the institutions of the state and the electorates. As such votes can hardly count during elections.

iv. The Executive (President) is becoming more and more powerful because other institutions of government or institutions of the state cannot call such President to order hence the abuse of power with impunity. This is gradually leading to centralization of power, if we are not already there.

Conclusion

The watchdog function of the media cannot bring about the desired accountability, good governance and dividends of democracy in a country where the institutions are weak and power does not reside in the electorates.

Recommendation

i. Heads of the various institutions of the state should not be appointed by the President and our institutions must be allowed to function without fear or favour.

ii. To achieve accountability and ensure effective watchdog function of the press power must reside in the people and the institutions of the state and not select few.

iii. There is need to put in place mechanisms to check the influence of both public and private media owners.

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