

REVISITING THE ACCOUNTABILITY ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Section 22 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Amended) states that “the press, radio, television and other agencies of mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the foundational objectives contained in the Chapter 2 of the constitution and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.” From the forgoing, this paper seeks to examine the role of the media in promoting accountability in governance looking at some factors such as environment, technological innovation, legal system and media regulation. Social Responsibility theory served as a building block for this study. The study adopted qualitative approach, adopting focus group discussion (FGD) using 12 journalists from 12 different media houses based in Ibadan, Oyo State. Results obtained were analyzed and presented in Percentage tables. Findings showed that the environment was not favourable in terms of societal and welfare of journalists, likewise the legal regulations being introduced every day have the tendency to affect the effectiveness of the media in holding the government accountable. The study recommends that journalists and media professionals should always have in mind the social responsibility function of the media and their place at the Fourth Estate of the realm as the citizens wait on them to provide check and balances on the government for the purpose of accountability.

KEYWORDS: *Accountability, Social Responsibility, Political Environment, Legal System and Media Regulation*

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, it has become more of blame-placing or witchhunting to call someone to give account or tell the details about his stewardship as it has been seen over time in the public service. It is only when there is a change in the political party that controls the government then will there be a call to give account of stewardship. Another scenario might be if the incumbent has issues with his predecessor, as evidenced in Imo and Kwara States, leading to a general misconstruing of the situation. Nwosu and Okeke (2021) see accountability as the state of being held responsible for carrying out ones obligation or duties, either while holding office or after the expiration of a term of office. In a democratic dispensation, accountability places on an individual, the liability of being called to account for, or tell detail about ones stewardship. Public accountability reflects not only the need for individuals to be accountable towards public stewardship, but also that of the government and its agencies to serve the public effectively by conducting its affairs in accordance with the constitution.

The provision of section 22 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Amended) expects the press, radio, television and other agencies of mass media to “at all times be free to uphold the foundational objectives contained in the Chapter 2 of the

constitution and upload the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people.” This section supposes that democracy can hardly survive and be sustained where there is no accountability in governance and in determining the input into the process of development; all of which are guaranteed through a free and independent media (Auwal, 2018). This shows that the role of the media in holding the government accountable to the people is fundamental to the overall success of democracy as the people have the right to know the activities of the government, especially the decision(s) of the government that affect(s) their life, property and community. Information is important for people to make choices regarding their participation in the running of affairs relating to them by their elected representatives.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The 1999 Nigerian constitution (Amended) refers to the media as the fourth estate of the realm with the expectation that the media should be the watchdogs of the society, serving as a sensitive medium of communication between the government and the governed. The government utilizes the media to showcase its activities and to keep in touch with the citizens, while the citizens also express their opinions over government’s actions or inactions toward their needs (Nwabueze, 2017). The media therefore plays the intermediary role between the citizens who are the governed and the government in making the public office holders accountable to the citizens in terms of their stewardship. But with the prevalence of corruption among state and federal government agencies and institutions the accountability role of the media now comes into questioning as some stakeholders have raised doubt as to whether media practitioners are playing their roles, as expected of them in promoting accountability in governance in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper examined the role of the media in promoting accountability in governance looking at some factors such as environment, technological innovation, legal system and media regulation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Find out the roles of the media in holding government officials accountable in contemporary Nigeria
- Investigate the prevailing environment within which media practitioners operate in Nigeria
- Find out the challenges that confront media practitioners in holding government officials accountable in contemporary Nigeria

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accountability in Contemporary Nigeria

In a democratic nation like Nigeria, accountability is vital for good governance, which should not just be seen in only governmental institutions but also among the private sector and civil society who should be accountable to the public and to their institutional stakeholders. Who is accountable to whom varies, depending on whether decisions or actions taken are internal or external to an organization or institution (Ifeoma, 2013).

Accountability is the judging of practices of public administrators to determine their effectiveness in the execution of their public functions. It is a process of taking responsibility for decisions and actions by government and public service organizations, private sector companies, civil society institutions and organizations and by the individuals working in these institutions, firms and organizations. Accountability also includes how these individuals and institutions are managing public funds, and whether there is fairness in the discharge of their responsibilities in accordance with extant rules,

contracts, standards and accurate reporting on performance results vis-à-vis mandated roles and/or plans (Jobarteh, 2012).

In the context of ethics and governance, accountability is viewed as answerability, blame worthiness, liability and the expectation of account giving. As a core aspect of governance, accountability has remained an essential discussion related to the challenges of the public sector, non-profit and private, corporate and individual contexts (Nwosu & Okeke, 2021). In governance therefore, the purpose of accountability is to maintain the fundamental and underlying principles such as public interest, public trust, rule of law and good governance (Idumange, 2012).

Accountability describes how authority is distributed in governmental system and how those who hold such authority are held to account for their actions and inactions. In democracy, accountability describes the relationship between those entrusted with public power and the people who entrust such power on them. Accountability is thus, “clear commitments that in the eyes of others have been kept” (Jackson, 2011, p.1).

Accountability in Nigeria has remained a form of rhetoric, it seems the more emphases on it, the more it becomes common practice among public office holders to play down on it. This was given credence by Onah and Amujiri (2010, p.145) who noted that most public officers in Nigeria would rather prefer to display practical wealth instead of being accountable to the public pointing out that the opulence being displayed was acquired through criminal disservice.

The authors went further to say that it is the lack of public accountability culture that is responsible for the total distrust that the public has towards their leaders. Perhaps, it is this type of poor culture of public accountability that could warrant the show of shame displayed by the Minister of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), Godswill Akpabio and the Senate committee on Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) with the of “off your mic, Honour is okay” situation. A similar scenario was that of Prof. Pondei, a Professor of Microbiology who slumped while being questioned by a panel in the House of Representatives over the alleged misappropriation of N81.5 billion naira fund allocated for the development Nigeria Delta region.

Unfortunately, none of the public officials involved in this unacceptable practice has been called to order till the time this paper was written. The reluctance of all concerned to enshrine a strong culture of public accountability in Nigeria revolves around the fact that the country has not really built strong institutions with leaders who are accountable to the public. Not only this, the mechanism to ensure that the misuse of public funds attracts stiff penalty is yet to be emplaced, as it is obtainable in China, where public officials are very careful with public funds (Onah and Amujiri 2010, p.20). To address this issue, there is a need to establish a strong institutional mechanism that will encourage compliance with the terms of public accountability and transparent reporting on performances.

Mass Media and Accountability in Contemporary Nigeria

Access to information by the public is the cornerstone of accountability. It is only when the public are provided with the relevant and adequate information can they hold those in authority accountable for their actions and inactions (Ifeoma, 2013). One major advantage of accountability in governance is the fact that it reduces the possibility of corruption and misappropriation of public funds to an almost zero level. Where this is obtainable, it reduces abuse of power by the state through the upholding of various kinds of internal and external mechanism by bringing up for scrutiny. Thus the media become major mechanisms of holding public officers accountable. Holding government accountable therefore is a constitutional requirement of the Nigerian media as it is stated in section 22 of Nigeria 1999 constitution (Amended).

Having in mind the social responsibility role of the media, the media owe a sacred duty to the public to provide them with truthful and regular information. It is in recognition of this significant role of the media that the Nigerian government enacted the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), as "without information, there is no accountability. Information is power and the more people who possess it, the more power is distributed. The degree to which a media is independent is the degree to which it can perform an effective public watchdog function of "Public Affairs" (Pope, 2000, p.119 in Ifeoma, 2013).

For the media to play its roles of promoting accountability in governance, media professionals must be abreast of the four fundamental questions about accountability: •Who has an obligation? •What commitments or standards are supposed to be met? •What will show whether the commitments and standards have been met? •What are the consequences for misconduct or poor performance? (Jobarteh, 2012).

Challenges Media Professionals Face in Playing Accountability Role in Contemporary Nigeria

Media professionals play an indispensable role in ensuring better governance and accountability in any society. It could be safely argued that the Nigerian media in this regard could be adjudged as having performed fairly well given the environment within which they operate. Despite the challenges the Nigerian media practitioners have indeed attempted to foster good governance, although the fact remains that there are still critical issues that the need to be dealt with. Nigerian journalists, oftentimes tend to over censor themselves for fear of reprisals, particularly the public-owned media. Another issue is factual inexactitude, an example where information is often incomplete or deliberately downplayed or with some facts missing. Some of the other challenges for the Nigerian media include: issue of poor remuneration; the polarization of the media along North-South divide which pervades Nigerian politics; ownership influence that affects media stand on issues, with the private as well as the public media have often being accused of reflecting the ideological and political considerations of their proprietors; the issue of protocol journalism in which highly placed public officials are deliberately shielded from embarrassing questions and investigations from the media in return for some consideration for the media (Jibo, 2003); extreme commercialization of news; partisan, biased or ethnic reporting of events (Olutokun & Seteolu, 2001) and the practice of black mail journalism.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Siebert, Peterson and Schramm proposed the social responsibility theory of the media in 1956. The theory owes its origin to an American initiative that arose out of the 1947 Hutchins Commission on the freedom of the press (Sunny & Okechukwu, 2013). The emergence of this theory came as an attempt to provide restraint to the extreme press freedom advocated by the libertarian theory of 1947. The impression here is to ensure the press does not abuse the freedom at its disposal. The social responsibility theory stated that the near-monopoly position of the media imposes on them an obligation to be socially responsible in discharging their duties to the society (Amedu & Abioye, 2020).

The theory explains that the media owe the society a duty to discharge their responsibility responsibly. While highlighting the main principles, the social responsibility theory asserts that the media should accept and accomplish certain media obligations to the society. These obligations include the effective discharge of the surveillance function, serving as watchdog of the society and disseminating information as factual as possible. Also, while writing on media surveillance as a social responsibility function, another study asserts that "people need to know if the streets are blocked or dangerous, some of those planning to drive or walk through the area of a disturbance may choose another route if they are

told what is happening” and further warned that “a news blackout sets a dangerous precedent. Word-of-mouth and rumours are likely to be even less accurate than the mass media. And if serious grievances have festered to the point of a riot, the public has a right to know” (Sunny & Okechukwu, 2013). From the forgoing and supporting this with section 22 of the Nigerian Constitution (Amended), the citizens look up to the media professionals to keep them abreast of unfolding events and give reports without bias on holding the public officer holders accountable in the discharge of their duties. The assumption here is that media professionals, as members of the society also have contributions to make to the betterment of the democratic governance of the country as accountability will foster development and growth.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey method of ex-post facto. The study focus was Ibadan, Oyo State, which houses correspondents and resident media practitioners. Primary data were gathered qualitatively through a focus group discussion (FGD) with seven (7) journalists as participants who included the state chairman of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ). The inclusion criterion was that the participant be a staff of a media organisation. Initial contact was made with the chairman of the NUJ to assist in inviting the participants and to arrange a convenient time for the discussion. The initial date was shifted by three days as enough participants were not available of the first appointed date. The researchers secured the use of a facility at the premises of the Oyo State Chapter of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) at Iyaganku area of the Oyo State capital to ensure that there was no distraction during the session. One session, which lasted one and half hours during which nine (9) questions were asked the participants, was held. The participants were assigned numbers from P1 to P7 to enable the coding of their responses. The data generated from the Focus Group Discussion were analyzed qualitatively.

DATA PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Roles of the Media in Holding Government Officials Accountable in Contemporary Nigeria

All the participants agreed that the media was playing their role in line with the 1999 Constitution section 22 (Amended) which specifically gave the media the power to hold those in government accountable and responsible to the masses (P1-10): “If you go by the way of editorial contents in media houses generally, either print or broadcast, you will see that a number of accessible editors will come together, put heads together, put down some contents to castigate government or call attention to some things that they are not doing right, especially in the area of fiscal and financial policy of this country” (P1).

However, P2 was of the view that “as far as government is concerned, they are not ready to listen they believe that whatever they are doing they can do it till they leave the government” (P2).

Equally, P3 lamented that “the only issue in carrying this role is that the media is not given the needed freedom by the Government; most of the freedom like those guaranteed by the FOI Act is just on paper they are not practicable” (P3).

Although, P4 declared that “I believe to a larger extent the media is holding government accountable because I can see a lot of flaws in governance being exposed, but as it looks like in this part of the world, it is very difficult for the media, sometimes to have access to information.”

In further emphasizing the fact that the media was playing the role of holding government accountable, P6 drew attention to the hitherto belief of the people in relation to the judiciary. “It is usually said that the judiciary is the last hope

of the common man but unfortunately the situation is no longer the same, people now rely more on the media as they believe that the media can allow their voices to be heard. For example, in days past there was no feedback mechanism but today we have feedback in broadcast media, so the media has suddenly become the last hope for the common man. This they do by holding the relevant agencies of the government accountable for governance and what they ought to do for the public.”

The respondents stated specific ways that the media are holding the government accountable such as “newspaper placing pictures at strategies places on the front pages to draw Government officials’ attention to specific issues.” Equally, broadcast media organize debates, and conduct interviews during electioneering for people to know various candidates jostling for political offices and what their agenda are or what they plan to do in government (P6, P7). “Some media houses now focus attention on investigative journalism for the main purpose of investigation to hold government officials accountable” (P5).

Equally, P3 affirmed that “the media is actually achieving this by scrutinizing what the government said it has done; at times they tell us they’ve done this or that; so we go out there to check for ourselves to see whether what was said to have been done was actually done. All this we disseminate to let the people know that we have seen. At times the public raise issues that make us to go out there and see how things are actually going. By this why we’re trying to actually strike a balance between the government and the governed.”

According to P2, “the media is carrying out the accountability role in several ways. In electronic media, there are some programs where they invite government officials to come and say one or two things about what they have been doing in their ministries as well as when there are some allegations from outside, the government will have to come to the media to defend itself. Likewise, in the print media there are opinion pages and columns where columnists comment on government activities which often times make government come out and to defend itself. An example is the security issue confronting the country.”

Participant 1 also said that “the media in this country is doing its best in ensuring that the government is held accountable to the masses. For instance I am aware that one of the media houses in this country on regular basis asks their correspondents nationwide to track some stories and juxtapose the stories from different sources. There was a story we did on the Federal government road network budget for 2013 and each of us monitored the Federal government roads in our locations to see what has been done in the last one year.”

From the foregoing, it was apparent that journalists in Oyo State are carrying out their role as the fourth estate of the realm in accordance with the expectation of the Social Responsibility Theory and the demand of their profession in holding the government accountable to the public. This they do through exposing flaws in governance through editorials and other news publications, not only through the print media but through programmes on radio and television. These findings also reinforced the position of Dunu and Ifeoma (2013) who stated that media professionals play an indispensable role in ensuring better governance and accountability in any society. It could be safely argued that the Nigerian media in this regard could be adjudged as having performed fairly well given the environment within which they operate.

The Prevailing Environment within which Media Practitioners Operate in Nigeria

All the participants except one disclosed that they have never explored the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in holding government accountable. The only participant who had used the Act also disclosed that this was made possible by a non-governmental organization (NGO) that partnered with on an investigation and that it was not through the medium she works for. However, all of them were of the view that the environment within which they work was not conducive to encourage holding government accountable on its responsibility to the people. According to P1, the intent of the FOI Act does not absolutely guarantee a free environment for journalists to operate. "This is one of the issues we have in Nigeria as a prevailing environment. What we know is that from the media practice, from what we do and the experiences that we have garnered on the job there is nothing new about the FOI Act. The act is there but it has not been put into real use in Nigeria."

According to P2, "if you go to any government agency asking for information that has to do with government finances they will never oblige you with the information," he disclosed. "Yes, I've not invoked the Act but with or without the Act we have been doing what the Act covers by exploring our various contacts when we need to carry out an investigation."

According to P3 "FOI Act is one of the many laws we have in Nigeria that are just there and are not used or allowed to work as expected in Nigeria's environment. We know that even many public workers when they get to them and you want to invoke FOI Act to get information, they know all the tact that they can use to block you from getting any information you are searching for. This is one of the issues we are having in the media. They know as a journalist, once you are able to identify yourself and they know you are a recognized journalist, whatever you wish to get from wherever, should be released to you but that is not what is obtainable in Nigeria."

P4 said before the act was established journalists had means of getting information because "we have learnt to build relationship, which although is informal, people give us information based on our integrity." According to P5 and P7 the FOI act is just a document that is programmed to fail. "The reason for saying this is because for any law to be effective in this country it has to be applicable in all the 36 States but at the present many state governments will tell you that the law has not been domesticated in their own states." This position was shared by P7 who described the process of evoking the FOI Act as "very cumbersome. It is very cumbersome and I think it is programmed to fail. P6 stated further, "I have invoked the FOI Act but I had to pass through another organization to get the necessary document I wanted."

While responding to the extent that having relationship with political office holders determine what to investigate and write about accountability in governance, P1, P2 and P3 believed that relationship with political office holders affect the nature of writing on accountability in government as some media professionals will call politicians or public officials to inform them about certain misconduct that has been traced to them based on their relationship. At times, they pointed out such relationship between a media person and politician could pose a threat to the life of such journalist because the politician may want to protect himself from being exposed by the media. "However, it's good to build relationship with them but one needs to abstain from certain aspect that may undermine some work ethics," P3 pointed out.

While corroborating the position of P1, P2 and P3, P5 declared that cultivating relationships with political office holders "usually constitute barriers among the media and the politicians." P6 however stated that "no relationship between the government and the media can stop media professionals from doing their job; the media is always on top. Yes, media

professionals build relationship with government officials but basically, it helps us to do our job well.” Equally, P6 said “at times the relationship between the government officials and the media professionals bring could bring sentiment in the nature of investigating and writing stories on accountability in government, but a relationship with the government doesn't stop us from bringing out facts and the truth because as a journalist you must always know that integrity matters and also you have to protect your medium as a media personality.”

On the level of proprietorship influence on the investigation and writing about accountability in governance, P1 and P4 concurred that owners of media houses are the ones that determine the kind of direction to follow when it comes to investigating and writing on accountability in governance. “I work with a government medium and I was not asked not to publish this or that but you have to understand the body language of your employers and editors and know to operate within some unwritten rules” (P4).

Equally, P3 and P5 agreed that the ownership influence was “a major challenge. In some media houses you are counseled on what to write and what not to write; if you go against such directive you will be fired. It's clearly an issue but at the same time you should know how to manage such situations.” P6 corroborated the position, saying “basically they are some languages that are suggestive; you just have to know how to balance your writing and not take a position that is seen to be partisan. The influence of media ownership starts from the editorial policy of the organization.”

From the foregoing, it can be said that media practitioners did not believe that the FOI Act will in any way make the Nigerian environment more conducive for investigating and writing stories around public accountability. Equally, media practitioners' relationship with politicians and public officers can be for good or bad, depending on the peculiarity of the situation. Also, findings established it that media owners influence what comes out of the media outfit having in mind the axiom that ‘he who pays the piper call the tune.’ The findings on the relationship has reaffirmed that the positions of Olukotun (2003) and Jibo (2000) has this has led to the issue of protocol journalism in which highly placed public officials are deliberately shielded from embarrassing questions and investigations from the media in return for some consideration for the media (Jibo, 2003); extreme commercialization of news; partisan, biased or ethnic reporting of events (Olukotun, 2000) and the practice of black mail journalism.

Challenges that Confront Media Practitioners in Holding Government Officials Accountable in Contemporary Nigeria

All the respondents (P1 to P7) stated the challenges as follows: fear of unforeseen attack, paucity of funding in investigative journalism, censorship from government angle and owners influence, lack of payment of salaries and other entitlement. As P1 stated that “with the situation of this country, to overcome these challenges is very difficult,” also P6 said “I don't see solution to these challenges unless the central government body language allows the media sector the needed freedom or unless there is another government that will give freedom to the media.”

When asked on how these challenges can be mitigated, the participants advocated a Press Council that is pro-media, which is devoid of government influence and that media practitioners should be given freedom while the FOI Act if, it's genuinely implemented, would mitigate the challenges (P7). Furthermore, P2, P3 and P4 advocated a proper regulation of the media industry including electronics, as well as the unpaid salary issues should be addressed, there should be funding of investigative journalism on accountability. Equally, journalists provide essential services so they should be encouraged with social security because what is happening in the industry is what is happening in every sector in our

Society. Hence, it can be said that none payment of salaries and other entitlement, fear of unforeseen attack, non-funding of investigative journalism, censorship from government angle and owners influence.

CONCLUSION

Journalists in Oyo State are carrying out their role as the watchdog of the society and the demand of their profession in holding the government accountable to the public. Equally, media practitioners did not believe that the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act will in any way make the Nigeria's environment more conducive for investigating and writing stories around public accountability. Furthermore, media practitioners' relationship with politicians and public officers can be for good or bad; as the relationship can bring effective reporting or bias reporting. Also, media owners influence what comes out of their media, having in mind that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune.' Non-payment of salaries and other entitlements, fear of unforeseen attack, funding in the investigative journalism, censorship from government angle and owners' influence are major challenges affecting media practitioners in holding government officials accountable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Corruption and misappropriation of fund are the order of the day in Nigeria, the media practitioners should up their games in holding government officials accountable as there is a provisional place of this role in the Nigerian 1999 constitution (Amended).
- Notwithstanding that media practitioners feel the FOI Act has some deficiencies, they should look at the positive side of the Act and invoke it so as to bring accountability to governance in Nigeria.
- Having healthy relationship with politicians and public officials brings professionalism into the media practice, media practitioners should avoid unhealthy relationship that lead to sensational writing and avoiding to hold certain people accountable.
- Media owners should as much as possible allow media professionals to have some level of independence in the discharge of their role of holding government officials accountable and that they should take the welfare of their staff as a duty that must be fulfilled.
- Regulatory bodies such as Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigeria Press Council (NPC) and even the NUJ should make decisions and take steps that will improve the welfare of media practitioners.
- Media practitioners should have of insurance policies as they are front line workers.

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