

**THE NIGERIAN MEDIA:
AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS ROLE IN ACHIEVING
TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNMENT
IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC**
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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to analyse the role that the media has played in the quest for transparent and accountable government in Nigeria since the General Yakubu Gowon era generally and under the Fourth Republic particularly. The period since 1975 in particular coincides with one in which Nigeria earned great amounts from her oil (Turner, 1978) and was noted both domestically and internationally as a corrupt nation. In 1975, the Gowon regime was overthrown by the military in a palace coup precisely because the regime was perceived as corrupt. The subsequent regimes were faced with the same problem of pandemic corruption in government. Public officials took huge bribes and the cost of public goods and services were inflated; government often paid for non-existent goods and services. What role did the media play or not play in the fight against corruption then?

Even where the media and in particular, the print media has exposed corrupt acts, these have usually been after the demise of the administration under which those acts occurred. For instance, the government's poor record of accountability amongst public officers between 1986 and 1993, which period has been described as the bane of Nigeria's corporate life (Okoosi, 1993: 114), was evident among others at the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), the Nigeria Telecommunications (NITEL) Plc, and the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), but which were reported only after the demise of the Babangida administration (See *African Guardian*, 1 November 1993; *The Guardian*, 18 October 1993; *Newswatch*, 29 October 1993; *The Guardian*, 13 October 1993; 6 November 1993; and *African Concord*, 7 March 1994). This implies that the problem of lack of exposure during the life of an administration is not for want of evidence and the necessary information.

At other times when they expose corruption, the media is not usually in agreement within itself as to how such cases should be handled. Disagreements occur among others, due to the politics of North-South divide that pervades

social interactions in Nigeria. For instance, the well-known event of 1974 that is generally referred to as the Daboh-Tarka affair comes to mind. It was one instance in which the Nigeria media demonstrated its North/South divide over an issue of probity in public office. Briefly stated, a businessman, Mr. Godwin Daboh, had alleged that Chief J S Tarka, then a Federal Commissioner in the Gowon regime, had used his office to acquire huge wealth. Since this development followed General Gowon's appeal to the public to assist his regime to fight corruption in government, it attracted a lot of public interest. Jibo (1976) has established that the Nigerian media publicised the allegations widely but was inconsistent in its stand on it. Whereas the Southern-based Daily Times urged Chief Tarka to resign from government because of these allegations, the New Nigerian that had been established to protect northern interests (Kukah, 1993) did not pressurise him to do so. It instead devoted a great deal of its columns to attacking "the Southern interests" that it believed were behind Daboh. Thus, the media left the unfortunate impression that corruption could divide it, depending on who was accused of it. Once more, the problem of lack of exposure or what to do about corruption is clearly not for want of evidence or information. What then are the media's obstacles? How can it be assisted to play a more effective role in the current campaign against graft by the President Olusegun Obasanjo regime?

MEDIA AND DEVELOPMENT

The enhanced awareness of the role of the media in development has been demonstrated by the current steep rise in the use of information technology in varied social processes worldwide. Even poor developing countries like Kenya have embraced the new technology of information dissemination. The ruling party in Kenya, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), has, in the recent past, launched its website (BBC, "Network Africa" 2 July 2001), to publicise its activities. This development is consistent with the established position that the media helps to cause attitude change and, by so doing, ensures socio-economic transformation (Schramm, 1964; Lerner & Schramm, 1967; Agbaje, 1992; Ayee, 1997; Makoa, et al, 2000). Other scholars are, however, not so sure about the direct effects of the media on behaviour (Gauntlett, 1998).

Given the above, it is perhaps not far-fetched to expect the media to assist Nigeria to reposition itself as a democratic polity with a strong commitment to transparency and accountability. This is especially because on 29 May 1999, the new regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo publicised its resolve to fight corruption and enthrone a new, improved manner of conducting public business in Nigeria. In this new dispensation, corruption is to be exposed, punished and eliminated. A new anti-graft law has been enacted and a commission to investigate and prosecute offenders has also been inaugurated.

Furthermore, in Section 22 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution, the media has been given a role to ensure that the government, at all levels, is accountable to the citizenry. Moreover, wherever corruption is checked in the conduct of public business, the media usually plays a critical role. In the United States, its role in bringing down President Richard Nixon in 1974 has been widely acknowledged. It is generally appreciated that the American democracy is well-served by its media which informs and educates the public, and ensures that the government is accountable to the American people. In short, the nature and character of the media greatly impacts on the performance of the democratic/governance process and vice versa. The role of the Nigerian media in the anti-graft programme of the current regime will now be analysed and evaluated.

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA

Nigeria is a developing country with a fairly well-established media industry (Uche, 1989; Agbaje, 1992; Jibo, 1996). It had a virile press before the colonial advent and has, subsequently, established an electronic media that has a reasonable reach. Thanks to Decree No. 38 of 1992, the broadcast industry has been liberalised and private-owned television stations such as African Independent Television (AIT) and Minaj Broadcast International (MBI) have been established with an international reach. A fairly large number of private radio stations have also been licensed and are on air. Thus, going by the numbers alone, one gets the impression that Nigeria has a strong media establishment. Beyond the numbers, some factors combine to enhance or whittle down the Nigerian media effect (Uche, 1989; Agbaje, 1992; Best, 1996). One factor which came into play in the Gowon era, and which has consistently been relevant, is the personal interest of either the proprietor or the journalists themselves. This factor is of course, relevant in the behaviour of the media worldwide. The world media, to varying degrees, is sensitive to proprietor-interests. "The piper dictates the tune" is the well-known adage. In the advanced political systems, such as the USA or France, the hankering after advertisement revenues is a pressure on the proprietor that dictates the line that the media should toe. "Big business" is unlikely to place advertisements in the media that is anti-capitalist. Thus, this is constantly a factor for the independent media to consider.

IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In other situations, it is the ideology or the politics of the proprietor that decides media-bias, or slant. In Nigeria, this has been the dominant consideration since the pioneer media proprietors were motivated largely by their political ambition to establish a printing press (Omu, 1978; Jibo, 2000). Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and

Chief Obafemi Awolowo, for examples, established media outfits during the era of decolonisation to enhance their political prospects as certain inheritors of state power after British disengagement from Nigeria. In the second republic, Chief Moshood Abiola was similarly motivated to establish the Concord media group to checkmate Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), and to thus enhance his prospects of getting nominated to run as President on the platform of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the UPN's arch rival (Agbaje, 1992). This ownership factor is still at play, as will now be demonstrated.

OWNERSHIP/STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

While owners of the more prominent print and broadcast media may be of south-south and south-east origin or indigeneity, the operational location of their media business is the south-west (Oyovbaire, 2001: 8). Omu (1978), has also confirmed that most of Nigeria's media outfits have been established in Southern Nigeria by Southern Nigerian interests. As a result, their perspective on events follows the structure of Nigerian politics that has been well constructed by Post and Vickers (1975). When a national issue enters the public domain for debate, the Nigerian media often, though not all the time, takes a North-versus-South position on it. Notable examples of these are the census controversies of 1962 and 1973, the Daboh-Tarka affair, and the more recent issues that will be analysed below. The North/South divide in Nigerian politics is so deep that public policy defers to it, and mass media outfits skew their reports and analyses to accommodate the interests of its adherents.

THE "SPEAKERGATE" SCANDAL

President Olusegun Obasanjo, being a Southerner, has benefited from the "soft touch" of the predominant media in Nigeria. In the "Speakergate" scandal that involved Alhaji Salihu Buhari, the first Speaker of the House of Representatives in the Obasanjo Presidency, the North/South perspective of the Nigeria media was manifest. *The News*, a southern-based news-magazine, which first reported the fact that Salisu Buhari had forged his age and educational qualifications to clinch the exalted position, pursued the allegations until Buhari was forced to resign, and was subsequently tried and convicted for perjury.

The News was quite professional in its handling of the affair. It contacted the authorities at the University of Toronto, Canada, to verify Buhari's claim that he was its graduate. The University's disclaimer of Buhari nailed him on the academic consideration. *The News* magazine then went to King's College, Lagos and established from Buhari's college records that he was under aged for the Speakership of the House of Representatives. This was vintage investigative

journalism, even though the issues were not as complex as those that *The Washington Post* reporters unravelled in the Watergate scandal. The approach, however, showed that *The News* reporters know what it takes to establish the facts by way of investigative journalism. Having forced Buhari's resignation, which was followed by his trial and conviction, *The News* was toasted for having helped the anti-corruption agenda of Nigeria. A more perceptive analysis of the scandal however raises very significant issues about the professional integrity of *The News*, since it apparently ignored some very important questions.

[1] Is it true that the People's Democratic Party (PDP) leadership knew about Buhari's age and certificate forgery and covered it up to enable him win the speakership election, as was alleged by a number of his colleagues in the National Assembly?

[2] When did President Olusegun Obasanjo know that Alhaji Salisu Buhari, whom he backed for the Speakership of the House of Representatives, was a fraud?

[3] Did the PDP cover up Buhari's fraud because of his huge contributions to its campaign chest?

[4] After his conviction for perjury, did Buhari receive a rushed presidential pardon because of his alleged heavy financial contribution to the Obasanjo campaign funds?

These and similar questions ought to have been painstakingly investigated by *The News* to establish if the PDP leadership and the President violated the law by perverting justice in return for financial considerations.

The most effective way in which the media helps a country to fight graft is to beam the search light on those in authority to expose their criminal acts and double standards. This opportunity was lost in the "Speakergate" scandal probably because *The News* did not want to damage the Obasanjo presidency. On the other hand, the *Today* newspaper, owned by a northerner, also pursued what appeared to be revenge by publishing similar allegations against a Southern Governor, Alhaji Ahmed Bola Tinubu of Lagos State. The interesting development was that these allegations against Tinubu were ignored by *The News* and were half-heartedly reported in the other Southern-owned media. It is thus significant that, whereas Buhari was forced to resign, Tinubu has remained in office and enjoys a good press, as a perfunctory glance at it, since the allegations were made, will reveal. This leads one to wonder if there are no double standards in the Nigerian media's fight against graft in the fourth republic.

ALLEGED 4 MILLION NAIRA BRIBE OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Another issue in which the media has displayed unclear professional standards is the allegation that members of the House of Representatives were bribed to the tune of N4 million to impeach its second speaker, Alhaji Umar Ghali Na'Aba. It was alleged that the Presidency paid this bribe, through the Governor of Rivers State. Even though this issue was widely reported in the Nigerian media, it has since fizzled out. Two serious issues in this allegation have been left uninvestigated by the media. First, is the serious allegation that the Presidency bribed the House of Representatives true or false? It is the primary job of a journalist to investigate allegations of wrongdoing and educate his audience, and it is a matter for regret that Nigerian journalists have allowed an important question such as this to just disappear from public consciousness for want of investigation. Why is the media not interested to establish the truth, whatever it is? Has the leadership of the House of Representatives lied against the presidency? If so, is it a reliable ally in the fight against graft? If it is not, what government is Nigeria destined to have when its major institutions of governance trade serious accusations that are then swept under the carpet by the media and all the parties involved? Does this approach enhance transparency in government?

THE CABINET SHAKE-UP OF JUNE 2001

There are other transparency issues that should be analysed. In June 2001, the President effected a third shake-up of his cabinet in which four ministers and four senior advisers were dropped. Significantly, no reasons were stated for the sacking of these presidential aides. Given President Obasanjo's widely publicised commitment to improve the way of doing public business in which transparency was observed, it amazed many that a number of key aides were sacked without explanation. A leading Nigerian daily raised this concern (*This Day*, 30 June 2001, p. 13), when it accused the President of relying on political expediency and of failing to state the reasons for the cabinet changes. The question is, why should *This Day* complain rather than investigate an issue of grave public interest that it finds unclear? *This Day* should do what reputable newspapers like *The Times* of London, *Le Monde*, *El Mundo* or *The Hindu Times* often do in the circumstance: investigate the cabinet reshuffle to establish the real motives behind it, and further establish if the President is shielding those he dropped from the cabinet from criminal prosecution. A responsible media exposes that which the politicians wish to hide! With that approach, transparency in government is enhanced. To complain about lack of transparency in government rather than investigate to establish the real situation

in it is not enough. After all, the Nigerian media has a duty in section 22 of the 1999 constitution to make the government accountable to Nigerians.

DENIAL OF ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT OWNED MEDIA

Under the Obasanjo regime, the opposition has been denied access to the government owned media. In the previous democratic dispensations, it was unheard of for the opposition to be denied all access to the government-owned media. In the North, for example, even the hated United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), was quoted in the region's media that was under the Northern People's Congress (NPC) government. The government-owned media played down opposition views and ridiculed them (Post 1963). Today, the opposition is denied any access to government-owned media in states like Benue, Abia, Osun and Imo. In a meeting with party leaders in Makurdi, the Presidential Adviser on Inter-Party Relations, Senator Mahmud Waziri told them that out of the four states which he had then visited, the opposition parties had complained against marginalisation by the ruling PDP which denied them access to its mass media outfits (*The Punch*, 22 June 2001, p. 2). In Benue State, the All People's Party (APP) had alleged deliberate effort by the PDP government of Governor George Akume to stifle its voice and perpetrate instead, uncomplimentary views about the party using the state-government owned radio station, Radio Benue: "... only appraisals that eulogise the government of the day are considered newsworthy by the indicted station" [*The Punch*, 22 June 2001, p. 2].

The Benue State Chairman of the PDP denied the accusation that the PDP was blocking its rivals from the state-owned media. According to him, the PDP was also sometimes denied a hearing by Radio Benue for reasons bordering on the collective good of the State. (*The Punch*, 22 June 2001, p. 2). The politicians in the state are very sensitive about media manipulation by opponents (Jibo, forthcoming). Thus, the last has probably not been heard about Radio Benue in the Obasanjo era. Its continued exclusive use by the PDP government clearly stifles criticisms, and the quest for accountability.

In Imo State, Governor Achike Udenwa's government has similarly prevented the opposition from the use of the State media. His main challenger, Rochas Okorocha, has been virtually banned from using the Imo State media facilities: "... Udenwa is not taking the challenge lying low. He has reportedly outlawed all Rochas Okorocha related advertorials on both the state's radio and television. ... it is just the first step to smoking out the ambitious Rochas" (*Tempo*, 5 July 2001, p. 24)

Similarly, the Osun State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC), "was recently admonished by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) for disallowing opposition views on its radio and television services. (*This Day*, 5 July 2001, p. 8).

What this portends for transparency and accountability is unambiguous. If the opposition is denied access to the state-owned media in states like Benue (in which the government-owned media are probably the only well-established media the average citizen has access to), the possibility of the PDP misleading him is grave. He can be fed with a diet of lies and disinformation that does not help to achieve accountable government.

It has been suggested that the Japanese press also colludes with the authorities to cover up unpleasant truths (Kerr, 2001). Thus, governments everywhere are quite willing to use the media for narrow selfish ends, either by bribing the media or placing an outright ban on its activities. Whatever the approach used, transparency and accountability in government is not achieved.

OTHER RECENT IMPEDIMENTS TO AN EFFECTIVE PRESS

One recent development in the Nigerian communication industry has potentially disastrous consequences for media, efficacy. On 31st May 2001, the Nigeria telephone company (NITEL), a monopoly, announced a stiff increase in its tariffs, effecting in some instances up to 126% increase in the prices charged for its services. This, in an economy that is already ravaged by poverty and inflation, makes phone calls too expensive and unaffordable except for the topmost elites. Investigative journalism is affected by this development because it needs cheap phone services to unravel complex issues of graft.

If journalists have to watch the number of calls they make because they are expensive, how can they be thorough in their investigations? It is most likely that the new NITEL tariff will depress the media industry and stunt its anti-graft efforts. The tariff has to be user-friendly in order to benefit investigative journalism and thus help to stem graft in government. NITEL has been privatised and it remains to see the impact this will have on the cost of phone calls in Nigeria.

PROTOCOL JOURNALISM

At a United Nations Development (UNDP) organised workshop on the media in sustainable development, held in Abuja in April 2001, a Nigerian journalist mentioned the concept of protocol journalism in which highly placed public officials are deliberately shielded from embarrassing questions by the media in return for some considerations, or because the officials and the journalists share a common ethnic background. It has been shown above that being from the South, President Olusegun Obasanjo has enjoyed good media coverage in Nigeria in spite of the widely held view that his government has performed below expectations. In the recent “NEPA gate” incident in which two of his ministers Chief Bola Ige (Justice), and Dr Segun Agagu (Power and Steel), have

been accused of “imprudent” management of (N2.3 billion) funds specifically allocated to reduce power outages, the media has been more than lenient in its reportage of the scandal. In 1974, when Daboh made similar allegations against Tarka, the Daily Times, for example, insisted that he resign in order not to prejudice investigations into the allegations (Jibo, 1976). In that instance, Tarka had only a remote chance to tamper with the investigations. In the “NEPA gate” scandal, the Honourable Minister of Justice and the Attorney General of the Federation, Chief Bola Ige, has a more than even chance to tamper with the allegations against him as long as he remains in office. He has mounted his defence from his office (*This Day*, 12 July 2001, p. 1). In failing to ask him to resign, are the Nigerian media and the President being fair or consistent in the anti-graft campaign? Furthermore, it is difficult to understand the failure of the media to investigate this scandal from an angle that is most likely to rope in the president. The following questions are relevant and would have been pursued elsewhere, by *El Mundo* in Spain, for example. The following questions ought to be investigated by the Nigerian media:

[1] After the President approved the special allocation of N2.3 billion to enable NEPA minimise power outages, did he monitor the use to which the funds were put or not?

[2] Since the outages continued to a point in which the entire country experienced system collapse and was thrown into darkness, did he call for explanations about the utilisation of the N2.3 billion or not?

[3] If he did, what was he told by the then Minister of Power and Steel, Chief Bola Ige? Was he told, for example that, the funds were in a private deposit account to yield interest? Or was this fact hidden from him?

[4] Once the scandal became public and the Senate asked the executive branch to also investigate it, what has the President done?

[5] Why has Chief Bola Ige escaped successive cabinet shake-ups in spite of his poor performance in the Ministry of Power and Steel, culminating in the “NEPA gate” scandal? Is he a sacred cow? What makes him one? What implication has the kid glove treatment of Ige for the anti-graft programme of the Obasanjo regime?

PREJUDICE AGAINST CERTAIN PERSONALITIES

The role of the media in the fight against corruption is also hampered by its tendency to prejudice the public against personalities and interests from certain parts of the country. According to Olukotun (2000: 136) The problem of partisan, biased or ethnic reporting is a deep one and goes back to the days of the anti-colonial press, when the nationalist press often turned against itself as it fractured along ethnic and party lines.

A columnist in a weekly paper has accused the Southern press of harbouring pathological hatred for General Muhammadu Buhari because he promulgated

Decree No. 4 of 1984, which the press viewed as a severe check on its freedom to bring public officers to account. The columnist believes that the Decree was necessary because it contained the distractions of the Southern press that were likely to interfere with Buhari's rehabilitation programmes. Furthermore, he has accused the Southern press of playing the political game of the UPN which was a keen rival of the NPN, the ruling party, and was determined to bring down the Second Republic simply because it could not swallow defeat. [Weekly Trust July 6–12, 2000, p. 14].

DEGENERACY

The degeneracy in the Nigerian media has been the concern of international organizations as well. The World Bank Regional Communication Adviser, Akin Fatoyinbo, has emphasised the need for Nigerian journalists to always check information for accuracy before dissemination (*Sunday Vanguard*, 22 July 2001, p. 17). Akpan (2001: 17) has observed that "... journalism practice in these parts has been reduced by a good number of its practitioners to something akin to black-mail journalism. Indeed, investigative journalism to a large extent has been thrown out of the window or dethroned to the detriment of a healthy, responsible and reliable media practice".

Even though the point has been made against the unprofessional media practices of the Southern press, the impression should not be formed that the situation elsewhere is much better. It is not. The Nigeria media generally tends to treat allegations of corruption with benign neglect. In its issue of 18 July 2001, p. 48, *This Day*, for example, published the text of an open letter to President Olusegun Obasanjo in which serious allegations were made against his administration thus:

And talking about corruption, we have seen nothing untoward in the direction of those caught with their fingers in the till at the PTF. Former IMC members indicted by your own government still walk the streets as free men ... In fact, it is during his tenure as PTF Chairman that Haroun Adamu allegedly bought a property worth 1.2 million [one million two hundred thousand pounds sterling] at the corner of No.24 Hyde Park in London since he (Mal Haroun) is not known to be a particularly successful businessman, having failed in virtually all the private ventures he had attempted [including magazine publishing], we thought your government would be interested in knowing how the purchase of the property came about.... Instead, you removed him as the PTF Chairman, only to recompense him with another lofty Federal Government appointment. Are we really surprised that Transparency International still crowns us one of the most corrupt nations in the world?

These are serious and specific allegations against an administration that claims to be fighting corruption. The remarkable thing is that both the government and the media have, apparently, ignored them. Thus, Haroun Adamu, a senior aide of the President, has not deemed it necessary even to comment on the allegations. Since he is a journalist, his disdain for the press is significant. When one contrasts the media's lack of interest in this issue, with its strident call that the former President Ibrahim Babangida be probed, one wonders what the Nigerian media is up to. Can it justify a selective attack on corruption? Where will this lead the nation except to bitterness and recrimination?

BRITISH AND AMERICAN EXAMPLES

In Britain, a leading politician, Jeffrey Archer, has been jailed for perjury having been exposed by *The News of the World* for lying to a court in a libel suit he had brought against the *Daily Star*. The *News of the World's* dossier of evidence, including taped phone conversations, destroyed his alibi (*Saturday Tribune*, 21 July 2001, p. 4). The paper got firm evidence that showed beyond doubt that Archer had lied to the court (*This Day*, 22 July 2001, p. 48). This is the type of professional approach that is sadly lacking in the Nigeria media practice. Hence, public officials "get away with murder". What it takes for the media to fight corruption is to have the kind of courage and commitment that the publisher of *The Washington Post* and its reporters exhibited in unravelling the Watergate scandal. The publisher made a difference because she allowed the journalists wide latitude within which to conduct their investigations. Katharine Graham stood solidly behind Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and they finally brought down President Richard Nixon in 1974. The point is worth stressing: during Watergate, Mrs. Graham backed her journalists against the advice of her lawyers and accountants for the simple reason that she thought the principle raised by Richard Nixon's 'third-rate break-in' was more important than mere cash flow (*The Economist*, 21 July 2001, p. 75)

In Nigeria, Agbaje (1992) and Uche (1989) have established that both the public and private proprietors stay focused to their narrow, personal concerns! When the media pursues allegations against highly-placed officials, they have an axe to grind with them! During the time the Watergate story was being investigated, the publisher and the reporters came under serious threats from the Nixon team – especially from John Mitchell, the attorney general (*The Economist*, 21 July 2001) but they remained focused. It may be seen from the foregoing that publishers and the journalists who pursue the rich and powerful in the liberal democracies also face a lot of threats, and they take enormous risks. In the face-off between Lord Archer and the press, as discussed above, it has been established that many dailies had damaging material in their files about him that they were scared to publish because he was rich, powerful and litigious. Apparently, the daunting amount he had won against the *Daily Star* and *The*

News of the World, which, together with costs, totalled more than 1m pounds sterling, terrified both newspaper editors and their lawyers (*The Economist*, 21 July 2001, p. 31). Thus, for some time he allegedly got away with all sorts of wrongdoing – he allegedly lied about his academic record, fiddled his expenses as an official of the United Nations Association; he had been caught shoplifting in Canada, and he improperly dealt in shares in a company of which his wife was a director (*The Economist*, 21 July 2001, p. 31). It is important that even though it took time and cost money, he was finally humbled by the British press!

INTIMIDATION OF REPORTERS

In contrast to this, there is evidence that many Nigerian journalists are scared of President Obasanjo because of his direct public attacks on them. According to Nwanna (2001: 11),

... Obasanjo does not care if he is on radio or television when he flies off the handle or decides to pelt you with his typical parade ground admonitions. Millions of Nigerians are listening or watching, so what ... I told myself to watch it when asking my third question. I was even tempted to cancel it but I reminded myself that it would be a cowardly act that even President Obasanjo would not respect.

Many viewers were shocked when President Obasanjo turned on a BBC reporter, Barnaby Phillips, who had asked him an uncomfortable question on the Nigeria Television Authority [NTA] monthly “face the press” programme and ridiculed him, the British Prime Minister, and Britain all in one counter attack. The former Vice President Augustus Aikhomu probably had this incident in mind when he said he had entered the political fray along with others to rid Nigeria of a president who lacks decorum and flaunts this shortcoming to the world (*This Day*, 10 August 2001). The point is that if the Nigerian press is scared of Obasanjo, how can it check corruption in his government?

In summary, what seems obvious as Oyovbaire (2001) puts it, is that it has been accepted quite reluctantly by media scholarship and practice that the media is a powerful instrumentality and agency for setting and executing its own agenda for its own target audience.

This agenda-setting role includes deliberate suppression of otherwise critical issues of public interest, gross diversion of public attention, selective target of issues and/or personalities for public and national discourses, and deliberate foisting upon the public of particular images as well as contents about public policy. The method for doing this is at times subtle, and at other times brazen, with the result that the media has acquired a very powerful and significant status of its own to the detriment of transparency and accountability in government in Nigeria.

THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

In Nigeria, and elsewhere in Africa, the electronic media ought to be the most effective media as far as the fight against graft is concerned. Radio, for example, has a wide reach (Makoa, et al 2000) that could be used to fight graft. Prior to 1992, Nigerian law forbade the ownership and operation of private radio and television stations (Jibo 1996). Then, even though government radio and television publicised allegations against public officials, they took no steps to investigate these themselves. They did not invite these people to the studio to defend the allegations levelled against them. In fact, on the Nigerian Broadcast Corporation (NBC) news bulletins corruption was only mentioned when an official was convicted in the court in a case considered newsworthy. In the purges of the Murtala/Obasanjo era in 1975/76, the electronic media gave prominence to news items pertaining to corrupt acts in government. Commentaries were also read to support the purges but, as would have been the case elsewhere, in the US for example, where officials accused of corruption in office are featured on the “Good Morning America “ programme to defend themselves, the officially controlled media did not avail these officials air-time to clarify issues. This deprived the public of the benefits of a vigorous debate over corruption and its negative impact in society. The Human Rights Violation Investigation Committee (otherwise known as the Oputa panel) proceedings that have been telecast on the national network of the NTA were widely appreciated by the public. But this was a flash in the pan. The commentaries that were ran on the radio and television against corruption in the military era may have helped to stem the monster, but they were isolated and not sustained.

The electronic media scene is now more plural than it was before 1992, the era of deregulation but, as has been discussed above, the government radio and television facilities are now monopolised by the ruling party in many states and are “singing the praises of the governors” (Ajayi 2001: 30), whose governments the constitution has enjoined the media to make accountable. The private stations have tried to ensure plurality of opinions but they cannot be very critical of government because they need its patronage to survive. These stations have been so hard pressed for advertisement revenues that they, in June 2001, urged the National Assembly to outlaw government radio and television from taking commercial advertisements and to rely solely on government funding. The spokesman of the Independent Television Broadcasters of Nigeria, (ITBN), Dr Raymond Dokpesi put the point thus:

...since the NTA and the FRCN are public organs and are for public services purposes and, above all, are taking subventions from the government, it will be ‘immoral’ for them to be engaged in commercial activities again ... that should be left for private stations that do not get subvention from government. We have to take experiences from other people and adapt to our environment. In Germany, France, Britain and all countries that have been mentioned by successive speakers, the publicly

owned stations in these countries are funded by grants from government; from radio and television licenses. It is the private ones that are allowed to run advertisements. Even the private stations are supported by the government because of the public service responsibility they take. (Ajayi, 2001: 30)

The stark point that the Senate Committee hearings, at which Dr Dokpesi made this strong point, brought out is the precarious finances of the private radio and television stations. Not long ago, African Independent Television [AIT], for example, was closed down because of its acute financial problems. This led it to default on its commitment to a consortium of banks that had funded its set up. A number of implications arise from the financial straits of the private broadcast stations in Nigeria.

First, these cash-strapped private radio and television stations are open to potential deals that may be financially beneficial to them but quite damaging to the national interests. What if, for example, they are paid to nurture a culture of impunity in the country by those (domestic and foreign interests) who want corruption to flourish in Nigeria? Clearly, these broadcast outfits, with their present financial difficulty, cannot effectively tackle graft that often involves the collusion of private and public institutions. Many journalists are easily tempted to get a cut from the deals and to turn a blind eye to them. Where does this leave the media and Nigeria's quest for transparent and accountable governance?

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian media can play a more effective role in the quest for transparent and accountable government if professional standards are followed. In particular, the media needs to show more commitment to the universal ethics of the profession with strong attachment to the sacredness of facts. Currently, both the print and the electronic media in Nigeria disrespect the facts!

Once the facts have been subjected to disrespect, the way is wide open for all sorts of professional misconduct, ranging from "protocol journalism" to bribe-taking, to be perpetrated. In the process, important considerations are compromised, including transparency and accountability in government. These are the contemporary ethics problems of the Nigerian media.

The skills problems are also a hindrance. In spite of the large number of graduate journalists in the Nigeria media industry, the skills of investigative journalism have not been widely acquired, or exhibited. In the event, serious issues, such as allegations of corruption against top government officials, receive a cavalier approach. Serious and widely publicised allegations are thus allowed to quietly disappear from the media and public consciousness. Investigative journalism is a hazard everywhere because the rich and powerful do not want their dark secrets exposed. In Nigeria, the danger confronting the

journalist is probably greater because of the general insecurity in the land. Thus, journalists have been killed with impunity in the course of their work, and this, naturally, instils fear in the hearts of those who would have pursued some of these serious allegations of graft in government.

CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR MEDIA PRACTICE

In brief, the Nigerian media needs an enabling environment within which to function effectively. In the past, legislation was used by government to close the prying eyes of the journalists; today ethnicity and money are thrown at many of them, and they are encouraged to soften their criticism of government. Thus, whereas the Nigerian media stood up to General Sani Abacha's government, which was, in the words of the media, "a dictatorship", the same media is unable, or unwilling to confront the excesses of a democracy under President Obasanjo. This is the paradox in the media. Until it is resolved, the Nigerian media remains an unreliable partner in the struggle for transparent and accountable government in Nigeria.

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