

HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The new media have become an integral part of today's society and are changing the way people communicate with one another. Social media as an aspect of the new media have become significant in effecting change and transforming lives all around the world. It has emerged as highly powerful development tool used especially among the younger generation for several purposes including to fight against corruption in the country. The paper argues that social media have potentials for fighting corruption however certain factors militates against its use in Nigeria. Situated within the framework of democratic-participant theory, the paper acknowledges that the conventional mass media, due to their inherent ties with the political as well as the economic forces in the society, are somewhat incapacitated from rising in challenge of corruption in the society. Consequently, the paper presents the social media as a viable alternative, arguing that social media tools have what it takes through serving as a platform for the citizenry to point out loopholes that may make the system vulnerable to corruption; scrutinise the activities of their leaders and report cases of corruption - all these without fear of victimisation. Nevertheless, given their anonymous nature, social media may have some credibility burden that could hinder its effective use in the anti-corruption fight and could as well pose the risk of malicious slander of character of innocent people.

Key Words: Challenges, Corruption, New Media, Nigeria, Social media, Harnessing.

General Terms: New Media Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a broad term that covers a wide range of misuse of entrusted funds and power for private gains. It is considered as an ethical problem, a behavioural problem, a wrongdoing which can be solved by means of personal 'reform'. Corruption according to Transparency International (TI), the most cited source in corruption discourses, is the abuse of entrusted power by political leaders or bureaucracy for personal gain or specific group interest. In Nigeria, corruption is a hydra-headed monster which is seriously afflicting and hindering her development in all ramifications (Ogbandah, 1994; Obasanjo, 1999, p.5). Corruption exists in all sectors of the society and damages a country's development by undermining faith in public institutions as well as discouraging both foreign and domestic investments. Corruption manifests in so many ways in Nigeria such as: slow movement of files in offices, police extortion tollgates and slow traffics on the highways, port congestion, queues at passport offices and gas stations, ghost workers syndrome, election irregularities, official contract fees being inflated, public funds doled out to political allies and personal friends in the guise of contracts, improper issuance of license to import goods, improper award of contracts, outright embezzlement of public fund,

kick backs on public procurements among others. On the international scene, Nigeria has been featuring prominently amongst the most corrupt nations of the world and has been blacklisted as a nation where integrity and transparency are alien and where no transactions occur without greasing palms. In order to contain this monster named corruption, Chukwuemeka, Ugwuanyi and Ewuim (2010 p.340-341) observe that successive governments in Nigeria have made several efforts by setting up different anti-corruption measures such as:

- ❖ Corrupt Practices Decree in 1975
- ❖ Public Complaints Commission in 1975
- ❖ The Public Officer Investigation of Assets Decree in 1976
- ❖ Code of Conduct Bureau in 1979
- ❖ Ethical Revolution in 1981
- ❖ War Against Indiscipline in 1984
- ❖ Corrupt Practices Decree in 1984
- ❖ Mass Mobilization for Social Justice and Economic Recovering (MAMSER) in 1985
- ❖ Foreign exchange Decree in 1995
- ❖ Money laundering Decree in 1995
- ❖ Banks and other Financial Institutions Act in 1991
- ❖ National Orientation Agency in 1992
- ❖ War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC) in 1994
- ❖ Advance Fee Fraud and other Related Offences Decree in 1995.
- ❖ Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) in 2000
- ❖ Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2004
- ❖ Advance Fee Fraud, Corrupt, Practices and Money Laundering Act in 2004
- ❖ Advance Free Fraud and Other Related Offence Act in 2006
- ❖ Fiscal Responsibility Act in 2010
- ❖ Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in 2010
- ❖ Money Laundering Prohibition Act in 2011 etc

Despite these various measures, the problem has apparently persisted. Ogbondah, (1994) opines that the mass media have been recognized as an instrumental tool in fighting corruption or at least

reducing it to the barest minimum in the country. The mass media as the fourth estate of the realm performs the watchdog role to the society. As watchdogs, the society relies on their information to uncover errors and wrongdoing by those who hold power. However, certain institutional challenges appear somewhat in impeding, the traditional mass media from effectively exposing corruption in the country, particularly in this era of profit-minded capitalist media institutions and the poor press freedom culture in developing countries like Nigeria. Consequently, attention is shifting to the new media or the ICT as an alternative platform for fighting corruption. ICT as a viable communication tool for diminishing corruption enhances transparency and accountability of government administration by making inaccessible information hitherto accessible to the views of the general public online. As a tool in curbing corruption, ICT has a significant role to play in a number of important areas such as:

- 1.1 Improving transparency in the public sector by increasing the coordination, dissemination and administrative capacity of the public sectors', as well as improving service delivery by employing user-friendly administrative systems.
- 1.2 Facilitating the collection of digital footprints and complete audit trail which increase the opportunity to hold individuals accountable and ultimately increase the possibility to detect corrupt practices.
- 1.3 Facilitating the work of civil society organization working towards greater transparency and against corruption by supporting a mix of methods of campaigning on transparency and educating citizens on what corruption is about and their civil rights.
- 1.4 Facilitating information sharing and social mobilization and ultimately providing digital platforms where citizens can report incidents anonymously. (Grönlund, Heacock, Sasaki, Hellström, & Al-Saqaf, 2010 p.3),

Since new media could play these significant roles in fighting corruption, it can rightly be referred to it as the fifth estate of the realm. Bekri, Dunn, Oguzertem, Su, and Upreti, (2011) opine that a 2010 report by Technology for Transparency suggests that the so-called fifth estate, or –networked citizen media platforms that rely on the volunteer contributions of citizens can not only fill the role of watchdog, but also

enhance the rate and scope of investigation once provided by professional journalists. These platforms, enabled by online networks, technologies and social media are engaging Internet and mobile phone users to demand transparency and make corrupt behaviour risky for public and private sector actors alike. This paper therefore discusses this new approach at tackling the menace of corruption in Nigeria. It discusses the strengths of the social media in accomplishing this task while highlighting the processes that would be involved in this onerous task.

2. CORRUPTION AS AN ENDEMIC PROBLEM IN NIGERIA

It has become a generally accepted thesis that Nigeria's problem is majorly that of corruption. In other words, the nation's myriads of political, economic and social problems are ultimately hinged on the fact that corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of the polity. Obasanjo (1999, p.5) observes that corruption "is the single most important factor that has hindered Nigeria's progress over the years."

Corruption in Nigeria has indeed become endemic chiefly because it is rooted in the leadership from where it flows down to all layers of the society. Idumange (2005, p.66) argues, that corruption "is tied to our historical experience as a nation and problem of leadership, our level of development, level of citizens' orientation and awareness is tied to this experience." Similarly, Achebe (1983, p.12) agrees with this view, and avers that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely the failure of leadership and her poor public accountability culture." In the light of this, Aja paints a vivid picture of the endemic problem of corruption in the Nigerian polity which stems from the failure of leadership and mismanagement of the national resources with the attendant issues of treasuries been looted, funds been misappropriated and stolen with reckless abandon and yet these people who perpetrated

this evil go untouched. More so, this problem of corruption has led to certain aberrant behaviours that are carried into various areas of our national life, out of frustration, cynicism, apathy, helplessness and disillusion. To this end, citizens who otherwise should show exemplary behaviour engage in deviant activities, that suggests that the problem which manifest at the surface in our society, has always been orchestrated by the people who should guide our national aspiration and quest to development. Aja (1996)

Unfortunately, corruption has remained an incurable malady in Nigeria as a country despite all the talks about fighting it by the successive governments, civilian or military. Thus, Nwahunnya(1996) contends "that this problem had remained so, even in the spirit of the 'fire brigade approach' made by the so-called military administration to check corruption." The question thus remains: what can be done to tame this monster seriously afflicting Nigeria?

3. THE TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

The mass media today have become the most powerful channel for sharing information and ideas at the level of society. In other words, the largeness and complexity of today's societies has made the mass media an inevitable platform for making communication possible and sustainable at societal level (Agba, 2002 p.33). Thus, through the mass media, the society sees, assesses and understands herself. The media dependency theory of mass communication recognises this fact when it affirms that in our modern society we are increasingly dependent on the media to understand the social world and to act meaningfully and effectively in it, and the higher this dependence the more influence the media have on us (Baran, 2010, p.370). Therefore, it may be logical to argue that what the society knows about herself at any point in time is likely to come

from the mass media. Such information and knowledge would of course include those relating to corruption.

Against the foregoing, the role of the mass media in fighting corruption in the Nigerian society becomes immediately obvious. Ogbondah (1994), opines that the media could carry out this duty through the following acts:

- Exposing corrupt acts in the system
- Educating and enlightening the citizenry and leaders on matters of corruption and public accountability
- Recommending ways of preventing crime in the society
- Publicising and praising heroic acts of public accountability by members of the society

However, while the traditional media have been expected to carry out these duties efficiently, in reality, they are faced with certain institutional hurdles that curtail their capacity in this respect. These hurdles arise basically from the fact that the traditional media are embedded in the political and economic institutions and so cannot be fully independent of their influence. For instance, news today is a commodity which media houses "sell" – a situation that detracts from their social responsibility role. This type of journalism Udeze observed obtains mostly in the capitalist countries like America, France, Germany and Nigeria. The problem of commercialization of media items has become a very big challenge in carrying out the responsibility the media owes to the society, rather what obtains is a system where the media is owned by individuals and are operated like any other business. Moreso, the primary objective of these media managers is to make profit and remain in business. In this context, news is seen as a commodity to be bought or sold, the more

bizarre the more news worthy. (as cited in Udeze 2011, p.219)

Apart from news commercialisation, the political institution influences the media's objectivity, citing Rivers, (1975) Sandman, Rubin and Sachsman (1976, p.372), maintain that the reporter's job entails informing the public about everything that goes on, including what goes on within the government. However, sometimes, the reporter's job and the official's job coincide, they work together and everybody is happy, but sometimes their jobs also come into conflict. Either the officials want to publish something that the reporters consider inaccurate or "un-newsworthy," or the publisher wants to publish something that the official would prefer to keep secret. That's when the adversary relationship comes into play.

Bearing in mind the abovementioned, the need turn to the new media for some sort of solution to the shortcomings of the traditional media in fighting corruption in a country like Nigeria become apparent. And the particular aspect of the new media which this paper would discuss is the social media which include face book, twitter, 2go, blogs etc.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The distinguishing character of the social media in relation to the traditional media is its horizontal as against vertical orientation; its two-way against one-way nature; and its democratic as against monopolistic potential. In fact, it is a democratised medium and in this democratised nature lies its strength. In fighting corruption precisely, social media enjoys the advantage of inclusiveness, i.e. engaging all members of the society at the same time; mobilising and empowering all to join in the fight and so makes the war much more winnable.

This paper therefore hinges within the theoretical framework of the democratic-participant theory. The theory is a direct answer to the emergence of “monopoly journalism” as a result of “extreme commercialization” of the media in the developed world. In other words, (The) private media are increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer individual owners or ownership syndicates. Thus, in spite of the existence of pluralism (as also advocated by the libertarian theory), the mass media voices which are available tend to speak with one voice because a number of media outlets may belong to the same owner or ownership syndicated. (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012, p.213).

Buttressing further on this theory, Daramola (2003, p.99) maintains that the emphasis on the prevailing democratic, commercial and professional hegemony in media system should be done away with so as to ensure easy access to the media by private individuals. The theory therefore advocates that greater attention should be given to the needs and interests of the receiver in a given democratic society. It promotes pluralism as against monopolization, and decentralization as against centralism. It also suggests horizontal as against up-to-down communication. It stresses its commitment to feedback in socio-political communication circuit. The theory equally observes that given the fact that the mass media have become too important socially, it should not be left in the hands of professionals. This theory has been described as the press equivalent of ‘grassroots democracy’.

McQuail (2010, p.170 - 171), in a more distinct manner, enumerates the basic principles of this theory as follows:

- Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media (rights to communicate) and rights to be served by

media according to their own determination of need.

- The organization and content of media should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control.
- Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for media organizations, professionals or clients of the media.
- Groups, organizations and local communities should have their own media.
- Small scale, interactive and participative media forms are better than large-scale, one-way, professionalized media.
- Central social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands, or through the state and its major institutions. Communication is too important to be left to professionals.

Based on the arguments of this theory of democratic-participant, the social media could be viewed as a uniting force, a democratic platform where all citizens would be mobilised to join in the fight against corruption. Such unity, such mass participation and such collective voice, would surely add impetus to the anti-corruption effort of the country.

5. SOCIAL MEDIA AND FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

The social media easily presents itself as a formidable platform for fighting against corruption in Nigeria. This is chiefly due to its democratisation impact on the society. Ogbondah (1994) observes that corruption thrives most where there is absence of democracy, where the people lack a voice and the press gagged. Little wonder, corruption has remained a prominent feature of dictatorial governments all over the world. Hence, the relevance of the social media in the Nigeria’s quest to end corruption becomes clear. Discussing this rare democratising impact of the social

media, Ferdinand, extolling the virtues of the new media maintains that The Internet opens a new wave of political participation reaching more people than ever before. This platform is mostly used Youngsters who read and comment on certain laws on social networking websites as well as organize public gatherings and protests. This social networking trend has led to a greater political transparency and public inclusion. Commenting further on the popularity of this emerging trend, while many traditional newspaper and publishing companies are losing their clients to the internet, social networking websites such as Facebook or MySpace are capturing new members every second. It appears that such websites are becoming the most effective means of distributing private or public information. Indeed, citizens can express their political opinions by being supporters of different political parties on Facebook pages. (Ferdinand 2009).

In this section, this paper will look at the various ways through which social media tools could be deployed effectively to aid the fight against corruption in Nigeria. This discussion is as presented in the sub-headings below:

5.1 Affording the citizenry opportunity to preempt corruption by pointing out loopholes in the system

The social media tools afford citizens the opportunity to act proactively against corruption by serving as a platform through which citizens could publicly identify loopholes that exist in the system. Corruption does not occur in a vacuum; it arises from certain conditions that are inherent in the system. Akasike (2009) points out that corruption happen more when the system has certain “institutional loopholes” that makes corruption always probable in the country which include:

- i. Delay in the judicial system (lack of speedy trial of corruption suspects)
- ii. Weaknesses in the crime fighting institutions such as the police, EFCC, ICPC, etc
- iii. Absence of press freedom
- iv. Weak culture of checks and balances in government

The above factors contribute “in no small measure to nurturing corruption in the system; and any serious fight against corruption ought to begin by addressing these institutional loopholes.” Given their capacity for integrating all members of the society in the process of public discourse, social media tools stand out as a formidable platform on which the citizenry could point out and deliberate on these loopholes, thereby proactively engaging corruption in the country. Through Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and so on, individual citizens could table some of these issues for all to air their views on them. This way, the attention of all is brought to them and the government is possibly brought under pressure to remedy them. In other words, through social media platforms, the citizenry would engage in what may be termed proactive journalism which fosters a situation where the journalist tries to expose the ills of the society, through investigative skills. This style of journalism clearly highlights areas which contradict the acceptable standards of the society, with the view to forestalling or discouraging the society from indulging in such behaviours”.

5.2 Affording the citizenry opportunity to scrutinise the activities of leaders

Social media, much more than the traditional media, offer the citizenry the opportunity to more freely scrutinise the activities of their leaders. Access to the traditional media is so much restricted and their use so much censored that such freedom of expression may hardly be obtained from them. Contrarily, the social media is a unique platform that affords a voice

to all; rich and poor, powerful and weak, low and mighty, etc, for everyone to air their views with little or no restriction.

Nwahunnaya, (1996, p.19) argues that "In Nigeria, particular people engage in corrupt practices simply because the citizenry take it for granted that no one can hold public office without corruptly abusing it directly or indirectly". Similarly, Ogbondah (1994) rightly noted that corruption continues to thrive in the developing world "because the leaders rarely face the sort of tough public scrutiny their counterparts in more developed, more democratic nations face from time to time." Elaborating further in his words, he maintains that:

In a clime like the United States, leaders always feel the burden of strict public scrutiny. This is why leaders are found from time to time resigning their positions even when they know too well that there is no law requiring their resignation. President Nixon resigned when he could no longer bear the weight of strident public scrutiny following the Water Gate scandal. There was no impeachment process initiated against him and there was no case legally established against him, and legally no one could arbitrarily force him out of office. However, he left office simply as a result of public pressure. Contrarily, leaders of developing countries rarely feel such compulsion; they are rarely so scrutinised mainly for the reason that they do all within their powers to stifle the press to ensure that it does not have the freedom to initiate such scrutiny as *Washington Post* initiated against President Richard Nixon.

The new media, nevertheless, seemingly provides a way out of this problem. By affording the ordinary citizen such freedom not enjoyed by the institutionalised press, the citizen becomes empowered to, on his own, initiate and sustain scrutiny over the activities of all category of leaders so as to ensure that a culture of public accountability is strongly entrenched in the polity.

5.3 Serving as platform for citizenry to report corruption with little fear of victimisation

One of the key factors that sustain corruption in Nigeria is poor culture of reporting corrupt activities. According to Ogbondah (1994), security agencies are not diviners who could magically determine when corruption has taken place; they operate based on information given to them. When this information is not provided, many corrupt acts go on unpunished; thus a culture of impunity is created and sustained.

Many Nigerians fail to report corrupt acts simply for two reasons, according to Okachie (2012); first is the fear that they may end up becoming the victim themselves given the belief that corrupt security agencies could be bribed by suspects to turn the table against a person that brought up a report; thus punishing the patriotic citizen and vindicating the corrupt citizen. Secondly, many Nigerians fail to report corrupt activities because of their belief that it would amount to sheer waste of time as the suspects would ultimately go free either as a result of their influence or inefficiency in the justice system.

However, with the social media, the above two concerns of the citizenry, who otherwise could have reported corrupt practices, would be substantially addressed. Social media tools provide cover for the citizens against official victimisation whenever they have any corrupt act to report. Secondly, the fear that such reports could be swept under the carpet could be addressed by citizens themselves by using social media platforms to make such corrupt acts public.

5.4 Serving as platform for citizenry to report corrupt practices by posting them on social network sites

Several cases of extortion by Nigerian law enforcement agents who were not aware that they were being captured on video had gone viral on social networking sites; this had afforded the populace both within Nigeria and outside the opportunity to view the brazen act of corruption by the people who are

supposed to maintain the law of the country. This is citizen journalism in action. The ordinary citizens now generate content for the media instead of consuming content from the media. This method of reporting corrupt practices is a serious affront to the gate keeping role of the conventional media. The implication is that the citizens who are linked to the social networking sites where these pictures and videos are posted get first hand information of the corrupt practices perpetuated by the people who should maintain law and order in the society. This could act as a deterrent for other people in public offices who may want to perpetuate act of corruption in their respective positions.

6. CHALLENGES TO THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

Having examined avenues through which social media tools could effectively fight corruption in Nigeria, it should be noted that these various efforts by social media in fighting corruption in Nigeria are however without some challenges. The greatest challenge to the use of social media in the fight against corruption is the tendency that it could be abused. People are likely to hide behind the cover of anonymity which it affords to peddle false information about other people. Social media users could be veiled, faceless, giving rise to a new kind of challenge to the use of social media in matters as sensitive as fighting corruption. Phillips and Brabham (2012) note that the new media "technologies allow users to remain anonymous as they participate in information exchange online, throwing accountability and authenticity into question." This user-anonymity otherwise referred to as "disembeddedness" Bucher (2002) cited in Phillips and Brabham (2012) surmises makes Internet communication highly risky, because disembedding always means loss of control: control over sources and their reliability, control over selection and control over verification of information.

Again social media sites provide provides a water-tight cover for one who intends to defame others. Falana (2011) observes that there are recurring cases of people "appearing in person to make false and incriminating statements against others before the police". He therefore wonders how far people would go at doing this using the social media.

Agreeing that the user anonymity offered by the social media is often abused Navetta (2011) notes that Social media environments provide a forum for defamatory statements to be made about individuals, and disparaging remarks to be made about companies' products and services... This could lead to a potential lawsuit and liability.

Falana (2011) wonders whether political opponents would not soon begin to capitalise on the social media to carry out character assassination on those in leadership position. While stating that the law operates based on verifiable evidence, Falana argues that social media may not offer such:

People who make anonymous statements are not likely to present themselves as witnesses in an open court of law. When someone has made an allegation against another, the first step is that such allegation is investigated and in such investigation, the evidence of the person who made the allegation could be required by the anti-graft agencies... The question then is: "Would someone who was afraid of attaching his name to his statement suddenly develop the courage to make himself available to defence the same statement before the agencies and then the court of law? Thus, within the context of judicial process, the social media may just be weak in the fight against corruption. However, in terms of publicising corruption and naming and shaming the culprits it could indeed be very powerful (Falana, 2011).

Apart from the legal and moral issues arising from this scenario, social media consequently suffers some credibility burden. To what extent would people believe messages accusing people of corrupt practices

when the accuser cannot attach his name to the statement? How much trust will anti-graft agencies reasonably attach to such communication when the source cannot be traced? Questions like this will continue to search for answers as long as social media is employed in the anti-corruption struggle.

7. CONCLUSION

The traditional mass media, due to their intrinsic ties with the political and economic forces in the society, do experience hindrances in their effort to rise in challenge of corruption and other social vices in the society. This brings up the necessity of deploying the new media (social media inclusive) to aid the fight against corruption in a nation like Nigeria. This paper admitted that the social media have what it takes to do this through serving as a platform for the citizenry to point out loopholes that may make the system vulnerable to corruption; scrutinise the activities of their leaders and report cases of corruption - all these without fear of victimisation. Nevertheless, given their anonymous nature, social media may have some credibility issue that could hinder its effective use in the anti-corruption fight and could as well pose the risk of malicious slander of one's character.

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