

Investigative Journalists' Role as Ombudsmen in Electoral Process in Nigeria: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of investigative journalists as ombudsmen in electoral process in Nigeria. Specifically, the study interrogates the extent to which investigative journalism expose electoral ills in Nigeria; examines strategies used by investigative journalists in electoral reportage in the country and evaluates the challenges faced by investigative journalists in the course of their assignments. The study which is built on mediatization theory employs documentation as a research design. Findings among other things reveal that there is low level of exposure of electoral ills by investigative journalists in Nigeria and that investigative journalists are faced with multi-dimensional challenges in the course of their assignments. The study recommends an increase in the tempo and tenacity in the reportage by investigative journalists on election process in Nigeria, a retooling and re-engineering of the investigative strategies among other things to effectively check politicians and political institutions in the country.

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Received: February 15, 2021; **Accepted:** March 01, 2021, **Published:** March 29, 2021

Keywords: Appraisal, Role, Investigative Journalists, Election, Nigeria.

Introduction

The role of the mass media in electoral practice is not contestable [1]. Observes that the media is a very strong pillar in the Nigerian democratic system, educating and informing the electorates during elections. He argued that the media has continuous responsibility of keeping the public abreast about the manifestation of political parties and the yearnings of the public [2]. Affirm that due to the numerous functions of the media during elections, they have become the primary source of campaign information.

Elections are main ingredients of a democratic society [3]. Attest that “the most preferred way of getting a representative that will spearhead the affairs of a nation is through elections.” Before, during and after elections, the mass media through their reports are expected to unmask abuses of power, hold politicians, political institutions and the umpire accountable; expose law breakers: expose electoral corruptions and other wrong doings among other roles[4]. Ate (2007) cited by affirms that the mass media are educators and key information sources that can be used in promotion of transparent government, prevent conflict and enhance development and stability of the society.” It is in the recognition of the germane role of the media in democratic setting that Omengha (2015, p64) pontificates:

A free and fair election is not only about freedom to vote and the knowledge of how to cast a vote, but also about a participatory process where aspirants and electorates engage in debates and also acquire adequate information through the media about party's

policies, candidates and the election process itself in order to make informed choices.

Going by the above views, informed choices which are vital ingredients of a democratic structure can only be possible through robust mass media engagement of citizens in the market place of ideas which is the court of public opinion. For deeper pros and cons of the election process to be explored, investigative journalism is desirable and inevitable. This is because the “electoral process constitutes a rich subject for investigative journalism as it relates to procedures, laws, representation of minorities and they require fairness and integrity” [5]. Investigative journalism is a vital tool for establishing a free and fair independent media, a key to democracy Investigative journalism is needed in election process because it has the ability and capacity to hold leaders accountable and expose societal ills [5]. Investigative journalism appears as the field of specialism to research and telling a story that someone tries to hide [5].

The power of the mass media is clearly seen in the area of investigative journalism where hidden skeletons in people's cupboards are exposed. Through investigative journalism, the political and business elites are monitored and checkmated. The mass media in civilized democracies deploy investigative journalism to ensure free and fair elections. In Nigeria, pressmen have been covering different elections using different journalistic genres but how much of investigative journalism is often employed in the reportage of electoral activities in Nigeria? This study investigates the role of journalists in the reportage of electoral activities in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

This study has the following objectives:

1. To interrogate the extent at which investigative journalism practice in Nigeria expose electoral ills in the country
2. To evaluate strategies used by investigative journalists in election reportage in Nigeria
3. To examine impediments against the role of investigative journalists in election reportage in Nigeria.

Methodology

Documentation as a design is employed to underpin this discourse. Documentary observation refers to method of "obtaining data for research purpose from public and private documents, the press, direct sources of documentations, statistical documentation and iconographic and photographic documents" [6]. Specifically, the study analyses documents from books, newspapers, magazines and journals. It is a qualitative research methodology which is "adopted when the research work is interested in understanding the meaning of a phenomenon. It seeks to find out the why of a phenomenon and seeks to unravel clues in belief systems, ideas and intangible things [7].

The researchers employed non-probability and convenience sampling techniques in accessing the data. Under non-probability sampling, the selection of process and the selection of units is based on the judgment of the researcher rather than the randomness [8]. Convenience technique is the scenario where "the researcher selects those units of population in the sample which appears convenient to him or to the management of the organization where he is conducting research" [8]. The study employs concurrent validity in the measurement of the work. This is a situation where the researcher checks the relationship between the current research technique and the instrument with an existing one [7].

Conceptual Clarification

Two key concepts: investigative journalism and election need some clarification in this discourse.

Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism is an advanced form of journalism that seeks to expose, unravel or unveil hidden facts for public good [9]. According to "when journalism transcends the sphere of simply chronicling events as they occur, the digging into constituents of events to expose to the public what some other people want covered, investigative reporting has come to play." Also known as undercover journalism, the job of the journalist according to is not a bed of roses [10]. "Much of the information needed to keep the media going does not come that easy. The investigative reporter is a "lid-blower", he opens up the can of worms to the despair of the authorities" [10]. Investigative journalism can aptly be used to "confront the frequent uncomfortable reality of rhetoric of transparency and accountability" [11].

In line with the above views, opines that under investigative journalism, "the reporter digs deep investigating a simple story that may uncover corruption, review government policies, corporate houses or draw attention to social economic and political/ cultural trends [12]". The expected role of investigative journalists in their assignment has been captured by some experts [13]. Contend that undercover journalists are expected to "unravel cases that those involved try to hide from the public eye especially corruption -that is, instances where public money is transferred into private pockets in illegitimate or illegal ways".

Elections

Webster's Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus defines election as "the public choice of an office, especially a politician" see election as "the process of choosing one or two or more people from amongst a number a number of contestants [14, 4]. The central logic is for those so elected to govern on behalf of those who elected them."

The Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN) presents a portrait of electioneering processes in Nigeria [15]. Equips: "electioneering process aimed at providing avenue of electorate with alternatives, in terms of political parties, candidates and programmes. In Nigeria, contest for power since the colonial era, democratically or otherwise, have often been virulent, contentious and divisive".

Cairo Institute of Human Rights observes that elections constitute a basic challenge to the media due to the fact that they put the impartiality and objectivity of the media to test [16]. The Institute notes that the task of the media especially national outlets, is not and should not, be to function as a mouthpiece for any government body or particular candidates. Its basic role is to enlighten and educate the public and act as a neutral objective platform for free debates of all points of view" (P.27)

Theoretical Framework

This discourse is built on mediatization theory. Flew (2018) notes that mediation is a loose term, indicating the process and modes through which the media extensively act as the means for a wide range of perceptions, knowledge, and feelings to be circulated in modern societies. According to [17]. Mediatization has become distinctive problematic in media research during recent years, with numerous conferences, seminars groups, books, articles and case studies devoted to the subject [18]. Notes that mediatization has emerged as a concept in media research [17]. Affirm that mediatization is perhaps, the commonly used concept to discuss the transformation of politics and political communication. They argued further that not only that the media have taken on a larger role in the opinion building process, but that the media have become the most important arena of politics.

Mediatized politics, as captured by is "politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continually shaped by interactions with mass media" Mediatization theory is apt in this discourse because elections are critical ingredients of democratic settings [19,20,21,22]. postulates that's the media have increasingly important or even decisive role for all social and cultural spheres and institutions. This theory situates the media as the driving force of modern societies and a very important part of the fabric of societal culture.

Review of Related Works

Many scholars in Nigeria have conducted researches on different aspect of media coverage of elections in the country [4]. In their study, media coverage of 2007 Nigerian general elections: a post mortem" examined the roles of media in elections in Nigeria beaming a searchlight on Nigeria Television Authority (NTA's) guidelines on political broadcasting and Nigerian Broadcasting Commission's code on political coverage. The study also examined the Nigerian Union of Journalists Election Survey Team (NUJEST) in collaboration with Center for Peace Building and Social Resources Development (CEPSERD) form for election observation to find out if their guidelines were followed by print media journalists in the country.

The study employed survey research design and content analytical approach of European Union Election Observation (EUEOM) final report on 2017 general elections. Findings of the study revealed that mass media have played a significant role in the coverage of 2017 general elections. The study however noted some shortcomings in the coverage of the elections like biased reporting, noncompliance to ethical guidelines of professional bodies among other things. The study recommended among other things that media practitioners in Nigeria "must always be objective, balanced and fair in discharging their social responsibility functions to members of the public [4]".

It also recommended that all ethical blunders in the 2017 general elections should be rightly corrected by professional bodies like Nigeria Union of Journalist (NUJ), Nigerian Guilds of Editors (NGE), Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and that media Law and Ethics be made focal point in Journalism practice in Nigeria. The study also challenged the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to wake up to its full responsibility of ensuring that the commission's broadcast codes on political coverage are strictly adhered to by media practitioners. The study also recommended that NBC must be legally empowered and financially independent to discharge its duties effectively and efficiently.

In another study conducted by titled "Are Nigerian media abdicating their watchdog role in the society?; A critical analysis" the scholars interrogated the watchdog role(s) of the mass media role in Nigeria, sought to ascertain whether the mass media, are still vibrant in their watchdog role to the society and examined the challenges facing the mass media in keeping watch over the society [23]. The study which applied secondary method in probing the phenomenon underscored the importance of investigative journalism in the society which it argues "provides a very potent platform for the press to unravel what is known, on facts behind the facts particularly in governance. Through investigative journalism, the press conducts intense investigations to unearth hidden facts [23]".

Findings of the study showed that the media are above average in their watchdog role to the society. The study recommended among other things that media institutions should place high premium on the welfare of the journalists in order to dissuade them from accepting gratifications and that investigative journalism initiatives should be put in place to enable the media to be positioned to expose enemies of the society.

In another study, titled Coverage of the 2015 presidential election campaign in The Nation and The Sun newspapers by a content analytical research design was employed in its investigation [3]. Anchored on political economy theoretical framework, the scholars investigated the difference between frequency genres of the newspapers, the space of genres and advertisements on APC and PDP political parties by The Nation and The Sun newspapers in 2015 elections.

Findings reveal that there were significant differences in terms of space allocation, frequency of coverage and advertisements by two national newspapers. The study found that The Nation assigned more space, frequency of coverage and advertisements to APC than PDP while The Sun deployed its journalistic arsenals in support of PDP. The study recommended that Nigerian journalists should adhere to the principles of fairness and objectivity and in election coverage. It is important to stress here that in all the studies X-rayed, the angle of investigative journalism in election coverage is downplayed or jettisoned. That therefore, explains

the desirability and inevitability of this discourse to fill in the existing gap.

Data Analysis

• Extent at which investigative journalism practice expose electoral ills in the country.

Electoral ills could take place before or during and after elections. In Nigeria, there are some investigative stories that impinged on the political process by removing some political gladiators from the office [24]. Affirms that in "Nigeria and Africa in general, investigative journalists have some breakthroughs despite the harsh operating environment [24]. Captures some exploits of investigative journalism stories in the political arena:

In Nigeria for instance, the case of former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Salisu Buhari, who was sent out of the office due to an investigative piece by the News is a celebrated case. Former Nigerian senate presidents-Late Chief Evans Enwerem and Dr. Chuba Okadigbo also had tough times during their tenures as investigative stories exposed the atrocities of their administrations. A former Minister of Education, professor Fabian Osuji even lost his job courtesy of investigative journalism in Nigeria.

Another casualty of investigative journalism is also identified by some scholars [23] notes that "through investigative journalism, during the Sixth National Assembly, House of Representatives, the media report implicated the then speaker of the Assembly Mrs. Patricia Etteh, of financial recklessness, misappropriation and mismanagement. The media went over and above mere reporting to investigate her financial dealings in the Assembly and in the end, she was found guilty of the charges. Accordingly, this led her to resignation as the Speaker of the House."

Investigative journalism appears to be the answer in riddling off societal ills and corruption. According to through investigative journalism, "the reporter digs into facts and unravels same for the sake of his/her audience, this is a radical brand of journalism which has given kings and queens (authorities) sleepless nights in different places [23]".

Even though there are elements of investigative journalism in our polity, looking at the cases that have been captured and the depth of corruption in the land, investigative journalists are either handicapped or have not done enough in exposing the mess especially electoral ills. Most of the cases captured here are post-election cases. What then happens to the cases of vote buying, vote selling and other general rotten transactions that take place before and during elections?

Another deduction that can be made from the cases captured is that, they are old cases and virtually all of them except one, took place at the parliamentary arm of government. Who is investigating the executive and judiciary who, sometimes secure black market injunctions to ground the electoral process due to political interests?, Again, who is monitoring the electoral umpire from the perspective of investigative journalism? All these questions are begging for answers in our nation's political ecology.

The conclusion here is that there is low level of investigative journalism around elections in Nigeria. Utomi (2018) cited by confirms the seeming dearth of investigative journalism in Nigeria thus [23].

History of mass media in Nigeria is inundated with breakthroughs in exposing the ills of the society though investigation in their

past. The basic means of exposing bad and ugly in the society is by investigation, but the present day Nigeria is doing less of investigations.

• **Strategies used by investigative journalists in elections reportage in Nigeria**

There are different models or strategies of handling an investigative journalism project. Fieldstein (2007) cited by formulated three modes for agenda setting investigative journalism [25]. These are:

1. Catalyst model, a situation where investigative journalist acts as catalyst, stimulating the public to demand reforms;
2. Ventriloquist model, a scenario where investigation process is initiated by behind the scene sources; and
3. The Dummy model, a situation where reforms are triggered by the media elites in conjunction with policy makers before publishing the stories. This means that under the model, changes are affected before releasing investigation stories.

In Nigeria, a catalyst model is what is operational in our media firmament. The ventriloquist and the dummy models, remain unpatronized by our muckraking journalists. Professionally, Nigerian investigative journalists often employ some strategies to survive in the challenging investigative journalism field. An investigative journalist and news editor of Sahara Reporters, Kojah (2020) identifies some strategies used by Nigerian newsrooms to combat media repression. These are:

• **You plan ahead.** An investigative journalist is supposed to be alert and futuristic in approach. Citing a photojournalist Victor Olugbenro, Kojah (2020) alluded that every journalist who tells the story is at risk of attack so they need to be ready because anything can happen.

• **Go undercover:** The head of Investigations of Business Day and former editor at the International Center for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), Fisayo Soyombo cited by Kojah (2020) confesses that he adopts the undercover approach often time because his face is not so unknown.

• **Work remotely.** The world of informatics and “computopia” has made it possible for journalists to conduct business without convening in a physical space. The Managing Editor of Sahara Reporters, Eric Dumo cited by Kojah (2020) discloses that they have mastered the art of staying above government’s blackmail by avoiding events where they may be targets, while still giving adequate coverage to the important activities. Technology is heavily deployed by the journalist under the strategy.

• **Cultivate and maintain strong lead and sources.** Journalists need to be rational and socially literate with excellent human relations skills to succeed in this strategy.

• **Fight back.** Investigative journalism is war journalism, you need to be strong, proactive and have a clear understanding of your environment to survive. An investigative reporter with Guardian, Richard Oludare cited by Kojah (2020) avers that every journalist must align himself/herself with the understanding of laws and several legal authorities in their operational base.

• **Learn to secure your gadgets.** An investigative journalist can be shattered, battered or punctured through his or her gadgets. Securing it is wisdom and a good strategy to succeed in your mission. A photojournalist, Victor Olugbenro who had some challenging times with security agents cited by Kojah (2020) confesses that he never leave his phone location on while on assignment and that he often blocks all the apps that may give away his location at any time.

The most suitable and appropriate investigation strategy which I recommend its adoption by the Nigerian investigative journalists

in reporting electoral process is the one formulated by the Board (2002) cited by [23]. The strategy sees investigative journalism as a key project with conception, gestation and birth stages.

Under the conception stage, the investigative journalist is supposed to start the project at the street level, identify questions and find answers, be stingy with projects, (putting the idea to rigorous test); build the right team; make it local (relevance to the local readers), think big and be courageous.

Under the gestation stage, investigative reporters are supposed to allow their projects to grow and strive by starting the writing process early, hitting sensitive subjects early; and focusing again and again on the thesis. They are expected to think visually (bringing photographers artists and designers in early); take the vitals and be willing to abort and re (remove the undesirables) from the work; stop reporting and review what they have and build structures that work for readers.

Under stage three which is the birth level, reporters are expected to leave time for writing and editing the work, decide who writes the final piece; write with authority, borrow tools from literature while writing, aim high, make use of nuggets; preview the story, leave some gaps (anticipate strong follow up stories); solicit reactions and finally celebrate the story- taking time to reward yourself and your colleagues.

A successful application of this strategy and many others will bring a positive impact in carrying out investigation stories on electoral process in Nigeria.

• **Impediments against the role of investigative journalists in election reportage in Nigeria**

Communication scholars have identified different challenges that have the capacity ability to hamper effective reportage of elections in Nigeria. The first is lack of media friendly environment and the second is violence against journalists [25]. Other challenges are lack of communication infrastructure in gathering and processing information [23]. and curtailing media space through legislations [25]. There is also the challenge of political instability which argues has “expressed itself in series of censorship measures against media practitioners in the region [23]”.

identifies lack of sufficient and access to data as a big challenge [26]. According to him “the most challenging problem in investigative process is that of data and access to them. Reporters who are desirous of doing useful stories have always have to contend with the frustration of useful data”. (pp. 1-2). Ate (1997) cited by [23] notes that another challenge of digging and sorting out fact is that of finance. According to him, “investigative journalism is capital intensive, but most media houses in Africa are under-funded and therefore cannot adequately take care of the financial demand of good investigative projects” (p. 206).

Scholars have also questioned the geniuses and thoroughness of African investigative journalism [26]. According to investigative journalism belongs to the third layer of reporting where reporters are expected to dig the facts and unravel information for the sake of his or her audience” [23]. Unfortunately, some investigative stories lack depth and often presents biased angles of an event. Ronning (2009, p.95) also aligns with the above views when he notes: *Good journalism does not sensationalize, it does not consist of rumor mongering. Much of what is presented in Africa is based on purely sourced materials, often one source, which has not been properly checked.*

Other notable challenges to the watchdog role of investigative journalists in the country are politics of diversion and advertisers' influence. Under politics of diversion, politicians and political parties are known to have close affinity with press for good image cultivation and its sustenance. Often than necessary, issues and events that concern these politicians and their parties are parties gain sympathy of the media by their patronize [23]. The above development indisputably, affects the roles of investigative journalist in electoral process reporting.

In the area of advertisers' influence [23] remark "big time advertisers by their contributions are in the habit of examining the content of the mass media. Stories which involve high profile advertisers are treated with empathy." That takes us to the issue of economic control of news which is a key concept in the political economy of mass media. Most of the times, political candidates that have the support of some media houses are advertised with superlative adjectives to marshal their egos. This development is a violation of National Broadcasting Commission code (2019, p.84) subsection 7.1.16 which states:

The use of unverified superlative such as "best," "most," "first," "number one," "tested," "trusted" "original," in advertisement is not allowed unless authenticated by the Advertising Standards Panel (ASP) and other relevant agencies. The Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals in Nigeria (2018, p.13) also laments that "Nigerian elections do not usually present good opportunity for researching the value and the uses of media because of rampant rigging, chaotic advertising and many unprofessional communication practices that makes systematic data collection impossible" To this end, we need investigative journalism to attack and expose such abnormalities in our political system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A renowned political scientist, affirms that the "media have been playing their role and will continue to play it but you also need to understand some accusation and counter accusations especially under this democratic dispensation [27]". This study concludes that even though the media have been doing great job in election reportage on a general perspective, much has not been done in the area of investigative journalism in recent time. The study also concludes that investigative journalism in Nigeria needs new strategies to breakthrough in election reporting in Nigeria.

The study also concludes that investigative journalists are faced with a lot of challenges in the course of their assignment in the reportage of the elections in the country. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are put forward:

- There is need to increase the tempo and tenacity of investigative reporting on elections in Nigeria. For that to happen, "the press must be free from bias by playing the role of an umpire to issues concerning electioneering [28]".
- Investigative journalists in Nigeria need to retool and re-strategise to dig out and expose electoral ills or corruptions in the country. This development calls for training and retraining of investigative journalists in the arts and science of election reporting. There is also need for media stakeholders to meet at conferences and brainstorm on the acceptable and workable models and strategies in investigative reporting on electoral issues in the country.
- Lastly, efforts should be made by media owners and practitioners in dismantling the challenges of investigative reporting in Nigeria. There is need for adequate funding, adherence to ethical codes of conduct and creation of digital

environment for growth of investigative journalism on electoral issues in Nigeria. Media owners, professional bodies and the government most meet and formulate policies in this direction.

It is the constitutional responsibility of the media to take political events and issues to the market place of ideas as articulated by the mediatization theory. For to be done, all hands must be on deck to make it a reality through the investigation journalism genre [13]. Attest that "the media have power, it is widely held among the public, politicians and journalists." That power should be harnessed and husbanded through investigative journalism to check political and business elites [29].

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