FREE PRESS AND OPEN GOVERNANCE: PANACEA TO THE CRISIS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

One of the banes of development in most developing countries is the problem of leadership which often stems from corruption, lack of accountability, dictatorship among others. This often thrives where there is no mechanism through which the activities of the government can be brought to limelight and or challenges. Indubitably, the press if constructively deployed could play vital roles in governance among other facts of human endeavour. This study therefore examines the role of the press in promoting open governance and accountability in developing nations. The study adopted social responsibility to provide theoretical underpinning for the study whereas secondary data analysis was utilised as research design where extant literatures were reviewed. Among other things, the study found out that free press helps to win the trust of the public in the government as well as curbing cases of corruption through investigative reporting and whistle blowing. The study recommends that there is the need for constitutional framework that will ensure the independence of the press to enable the press work freely without fear or favour

Keywords: Free press, open governance, democracy, accountability, developing countries

Introduction

Free Press and Open Governance: Panacea to the crisis of accountability in developing countries

The mass media are known for playing diverse roles in the society which include but not limited to informing, entertaining, educating, and surveillance of the environment. These crucial roles are pivotal in the efficient running of day-to-day life's activities. Without the media, there will be so much vacuum in the society that nothing else could fill. The society depends on the mass media to stay abreast with happenings as well as amplifying their voices to appropriate quarters whenever the need arises. This explains why the media are seen as the voice to the voiceless because courtesy of the mass media, underrepresented groups and minors could air their views to concerned authorities. It is in line with this that the media are seen as the fourth estate of the realm in the society. Buttressing this further, Thomas Jefferson, a onetime America's President once opined that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without

newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter" (Forbes, 2015).

While perspectives and findings vary on the role of the press in the country as well as its nexus with governments, there is a consensus that the concept of sustainable development and governance will be an unrealistic proposition without effective and uncontrolled participation of news sources in disseminating national and political issues. The press plays an indispensable role in the governance of modern nations. However, this can only be achieved where the press is being given the upper hand to operate without interference in their duties. Essentially, free press is concerned with the right of the press to carry out their obligations without any form of internal or external control. It is in the independence of the press that their power lies to bring about the needed development in any given state. Where the press is gagged, it will be difficult if not impossible for any sustainable development to happen. In a democratic state, the press is an integral part of governance and they work as partners in progress with the government to bring about development. In addition, where the government is not performing her duties, as the fourth estate of the realm, the press as to serve as watch digs that will raise the needed alarm to bring the government to order.

Free press is at the root of every accountable government. In other words, the press can only demand for accountability from the government when they are free to carry out their social responsibility without fear or favour. This behooves that the legal framework must be void of draconian laws and principles. Omu (1978) cited in Okoro (2016) averred that about three decades ago, Omu (1978) emphasized that the press in Nigeria should be an effective and vibrant independent entity that could be instrumental to achieving sustainable political development goals. For much of the twenty century, news sources in Nigeria were involved in promoting political awareness, encouraging civic engagement, sensitizing citizens to national issues, and shaping public opinions on a variety of political issues. The surveillance role of the media requires that they beam their searchlight on happenings within the society where certain issues that are considered newsworthy are raised to prominence where they become agenda for public discussion. This onward brings about an avenue where such issues are critically analysed for the public to understand and where such is a policy the government intends to implement; the public are enlightened to make informed decisions.

Any government that prioritises the use of the press to keep the public abreast about their policies and activities will easily secure the trust of the people. This is the hallmark of operating an open government where no stone in government is left unturned and no carcasses are kept in the cupboard behind public view. This will go a long way in providing lasting solution to the accountability crisis that characterise governance in developing countries. It is against this premise that this study is carried out to examine the role of free press in open governance as a panacea to accountability crisis in developing nations like Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of the research is to examine the role free press and open governance as a panacea to crisis of accountability in developing countries. The specific objectives are to;

1. Identify the role of free press and open governance in promoting accountability in developing countries
2. Examine the impact of free press and open governance as panacea to accountability crisis in Nigeria

Review of Concepts

Major concepts that constitute the study were reviewed to lay sound contextual foundation for the study.

Free Press

Free press also known as independent press entails a situation where the press are given free hand to carry out their sacred obligations to the people without any form of interference or hindrance from any quarters. A free, independent media can enable and facilitate informed public debate, serve as an outlet for citizen perspectives, and act as a check on government power and corruption without any fear or favour. This is only possible where and when the press is independent and will not be victimized for carrying out their social responsibility in the event that it negates the whims and caprices of political figures in the state. Free press is an integral part of an open government in every democratically elected government.

The guarantee of freedom of expression and information is recognized as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948, the European Convention on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The positive relationship between the growth of the free press and the process of democratization is thought to be reciprocal. Free press can only exist in a society where there is freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and a widely celebrated phenomenon wherever it is granted. Nigeria joined the League of Nations all over the globe on International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in which Article 19 mandates States to guarantee freedom of expression, which comprises the right to hold opinions without interference, and the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds through any medium regardless of frontiers (Anyim, 2021). This right is being exercised in diverse ways, majorly in oral or written forms and enjoyed by both groups and individuals alike. New media technologies have extended the exercise of this fundamental human right from the known traditional forms to social media platforms which include but not limited to facebook, whatsapp, twitter, youtube, instagram, etc.

Open Governance

Open governance is a system of governance where the activities of the government are made known to the people with high level of transparency. This kind of governance enables the public to repose their trust on the government. Governance describes the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented. Thus, governance is the process whereby public institutions conduct public affairs, manage public resources and guarantee the realization of rights and services. Good governance accomplishes this in a manner essentially free of abuse and corruption, and with due regard for the rule of law. It provides a framework within which political, social and economic priorities are based on a broad consensus in society, and the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are considered for the decision-making processes. In addition, Good Governance has major implications for equity, poverty and quality of life.

Open governance is an integral part of every democratically elected government and therefore indispensable in the practice of democracy. In the context of this study, democracy can be used synonymously with open governance. Barak (2006), cited in Nwogu (2015) asserted that democracy is a system of government that allows for freedom of political expression, freedom of speech and freedom of the press which are considered to be the essential rights that allow eligible citizens to be adequately informed and able to vote according to their own interests.

Freedom of speech is the lifeblood of democracy that should characterise every open government. The free flow of information and ideas informs political debate as well as shape public opinion. It is therefore imperative to promote freedom of information in a democratic setting because it is an inalienable right of the citizens as enshrined in Section 39 (1&2) as citizens are entitled to the right to impart ideas without any form of restriction or interference. With the advent of the democracy in Nigeria, the citizens' right to freedom of speech transcends the realm of interpersonal and small group communication to traditional media domain which includes the freedom to receive and impart ideas without restriction or interference from any quarter.

Literature Review

Role of Free Press in Open Government

The media serve as veritable tools used for the promotion of popular participation in democratic government. In Nigeria for instance, several challenges have constrained the sustainability of democratic governance. These challenges range from separatist agitations in the South-East, Banditry in the North-West and Boko–Haram insurgency in the North-East. The media have been consistently used to douse tensions towards promoting popular participation in the indivisible Nigerian project and corporate existence.

Furthermore, the mass media are indispensable in the orientation of citizens on civic rights/responsibilities, electoral processes as well as educating the people about government policies. Given the ever-increasing population of Nigeria, it takes the effective utilisation of the media to enlighten the teeming population who might not have access to formal education to understand their rights and duties in a democratic government.

Impact of Free Press in Promoting Accountability in Governance

The impact of the press is palpably felt in every area of human endeavour today. The mass media have gone beyond mere channels or purveyors on information to emerging as the fourth estate of the realm that play vital roles in contributing immensely to the development of the state. The mass media serve as the bridge connecting the people with the government. In modern democracy, representatives are elected to represent the people at different levels of government. The mass media source, process and disseminate relevant information from the people to the government and vice versa. This bridges the communication gap between the people and the government thereby forestalling chaos and insubordination that may arise from breakdown of communication. Free press online and offline is necessary for open governance to thrive in any given state.

Courtesy of the relative freedom Nigerian press enjoy today, several cases of corruption and sharp practices in government have been unraveled and curtailed. The impact of free press in promoting accountability has surged with the advent of social media platforms. This has attracted the attention of the government who feel threatened by this development top attempt

gagging the press and the general public from exposing their loopholes. Santas (2021) conducted a study on "Social Media Regulation in a Democratic Nigeria: Challenges and Implications." The study found out that the major challenge to the implementation of Anti-social Media bill in Nigeria is of infringement on citizens' right to free speech as it will likely constitute an attack on freedom of expression – a fundamental right of human beings which democratic regimes the world over seeks to uphold.

Freedom of speech and expression could be considered one of the most fundamental of all freedoms. Freedom of expression is a basic foundation of democracy. It is a core freedom without which democracy could not exist. In fact, democracy can only thrive where there is freedom of speech for the citizens to call government to order as a way to ensure checks and balances and to promote accountability in governance. The advent of social media provides a public sphere where people air their views and make observations about salient issues in governance. It has greatly aided the growth of activism as well as a platform for promoting good governance and social justice.

Studies like Oloyede and Elega (2020) explores the impact of social media hashtags in promoting Digital activism, like the #EndSARS on awareness creation about police extortion, brutality, rape, assault, and extra judicial killings, ultimately leading to the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Other prominent examples include the viral online protest on the killings of Deborah in Sokoto and Hanifa in Kano show how the social media can be used for activism and to bring accountability in governance. Nigeria has also witnessed significant improvement in political participation over the years due to the advent and use of social media for political education and campaign. These among many other countless benefits abound on the positive impacts of the social media in Nigeria. Agbaenyi, Okafor and Nwagbo (2015) attributed the victory of the opposition party (APC) in the 2015 general elections to the use of social media by political actors for transmitting campaign promises and exposing some ills of the incumbent government and its party to the people as opposed to the mainstream media that were mostly in controlled by the incumbent government.

Theoretical Framework

Social responsibility theory was used as theoretical underpinning to the study due to its suitability to the context of the current study.

Social Responsibility Theory

Social responsibility was propounded by Siebert Peterson and Schramin in 1956. The theory serves as ethics that guide any action, be it in media or other organizations that put an obligation towards environment, society, culture and economy. Social responsibility theory recognizes the need for free and responsible press that will carry out their sacred obligations in a way that does not require government control (Nwabueze, 2014). In addition, media like any other sector should not harm, but should promote environment and socio-cultural aspects in relation to the economy of the place. Social responsibility theory of mass media is relatively a new concept which started in the mid-20th century and is used mostly by developing and at least developed countries. The theory encourages total freedom to press and no censorship, but it should be regulated according to social responsibilities and external controls content is also filtered through public obligation and interference.

The theory replaced the libertarian theory with the view that libertarianism was outdated. The theory also incorporates some aspects of authoritarian theory. After the emergence of this theory, professionalism in media started to be taken seriously. The social responsibility theory

of mass media changed the way press published news from objective reporting to interpretative reporting before the theory, facts were presented without any interpretation. The audience interpreted it the way they wanted to. This caused problems as interpretation was not based on reality and it affected the social order. Interpretative reporting and investigative reporting started to uncover the reality behind every case.

In social responsibility Theory, the press is taken to be for the people and society. The task of the press is to make a code of conduct that follow it, to develop a standard in journalism, to make journalism better, to protect journalism better, to protect journalists and to have penalties if any journalist violates the code of conduct. This way the facts provided by the press are analyzed and interpreted so that the people get true information and understandable news. This helps maintain social harmony by revealing social evils like corruption and discouraging other bad conducts. The media is taken as a place for the voiceless to have a voice and develop public opinions where each and every person has the right to speak, express and publish. It is considered not an end but a tool for social development.

Therefore, the objectives of media are stated to inform, document, analyze, interpret, mediate and mobilize by creating and finding solutions. For example, reports of the activities and policies of the government could be covered and published and/or aired for public analysis and enlightenment. This paves way for open governance and accountability by the government to the populace through the press and the bridge. The theory agrees with this study in that the only way free press and open governance can thrive us when the press are allowed to carry out their social responsibility without any constraints as postulated in the social responsibility theory.

Research Methodology

The documentary review method was adopted in this study. The documentary review method is mostly used to investigate and categorise extant literature (Payne & Payne) cited in (Ahmed, 2010). "The application of documentary research technique needs rigorous and methodical study and analysis of documented sources based on written texts (literature), visuals and graphical data which may be based on secondary data (Agbo, Lenshie, and Boye, 2018). According to Bailey (1994), cited in Ahmed (2010), the documentary research method comprises the analysis of documents that provide information about the subject being studied.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are discussed in line with the research objectives vis-a-vis relevant extant literature.

The first objective of the study aimed at identifying the various roles free press play in open governance. Studies have shown that an independents press plays significant roles in promoting open governance as well as resolving accountability crisis in government. Alfakoro (2019) stated that inadequacies in accountability and transparency of public affairs managements in the nation are major contributing factors to loss of public trust in the government. To regain public trust that was previously reposed on the government, there is the urgent need for accountability in governance which can be achieved via the instrumentality of the mass media. Suffice to say that one of the vital roles free press plays in open governance is winning the trust of the people which makes governance seamless for the leaders.

In addition to winning public trust, the mass media are also watchdog of the society who through surveillance of the environment are able to beam their searchlight on every activity of the government in order to raise alarm over maladministration, corruption, injustice, insecurity

among other societal ills. Deane (2016a) stated that an independent media remains one of society's most effective assets available to curb corruption and to foster accountability. The press serves as whistle blowers over matters of corruption in most particularly developing nations like Nigeria where corruption stinks at the highest levels. Through investigative and data journalism, the press often burst, unearth corruption cases that would have been swept under the carpet if nit for the intervention of the press.

The second object sought to examine the impact of free press in open governance as a panacea to accountability crisis in developing countries. Deane (2016b) opined that while most people acknowledge that the influence and impact of changing media and communication on governance outcomes is advancing, the extent to which new media landscapes are contributing to more informed, peaceful and accountable societies remain in question. This behooves the need to investigate the impact of free press in governance. In modern democratic history, the press are considered one of the most powerful agents of democratic accountability. Extensive empirical research has demonstrated the close relationship between a free press and good governance, including the association between access to balanced, independent programming and improved knowledge and political participation (Deane, 2015).

Research in development communication has shown that mass media are veritable tools for development of society and sustainable democracy. In the Nigerian polity, the mass media have been used severally for social change campaign and programmes like stopping of female genital mutilation, accepting of child-killer disease immunization and vaccination exercises, encouraging of girl-child education/gender equality, inclusivity in governance, anti-hate speech campaign among others. The role of the mass media in sustainable democracy and development of the society cannot be overemphasised however stated (Kadiri, Mohammed, Raji & Sulaiman, 2015).

The mass media also set agenda for public discourse. Through the agenda setting role of the mass media, they were highly instrumental in the emergence of Joe Biden and Muhammadu Buhari as Presidents in the United States of America and Nigeria respectively. When political candidates are given prominence and reported frequently on the media, it subtly influences the political decisions of the electorate. In the same vein, the mass media are used to persuade the masses to support a given government policy through persuasive messages and media propaganda. Livingstone and Lunt (2013), averred that there is a close relationship between participatory mass media and participatory democracy. The mass media are often deployed to discourage political apathy, thereby promoting participatory democracy. With the potency of the mass media today, it is, therefore, pertinent to say that the mass media can be used constructively to initiate and or maintain sustainable democracy regardless of the nature of the environment.

Furthermore, the crusading functions of the mass media in a society replete by corruption such as ours cannot be left out. Government and private institutions that use their organisations to enrich themselves against the corporate interest of the people whom they should serve are put to check by the media through their surveillance function.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The media are indispensable stakeholders in the project of developing any society and blossoming of all policies and programme. The stakeholders in society should therefore, give them every opportunity to thrive and not see them as adversaries. This way they can have opportunity to galvanise Nigerians to become productive. To achieve this, the press must be given independence in reality beyond theory as it is in most developing countries today. Free

press is crucial to setting the pedestal for open governance thereby serving as panacea to the accountability crisis that characterise our government in developing countries.

1. Free press is crucial to enabling the media to play their divergence roles in any democratic society. There is therefore the need for government to rid off all measures put in place to interfere with the activities of the press in discharging their social responsibility within professional ethics.
2. There is also the need for constitutional framework that will ensure the independence of the press to enable the press work freely without fear or favour.

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