



Broadcast Media's Watchdog Role in Nigeria's Anti-Corruption Efforts: An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Corruption is a major impediment to development in most African countries in general and Nigeria in particular. In Nigeria, corruption accounts for many of the problems confronting the country. It is a leviathan that depletes the resources of the Nigerian state. The purpose of this study was to examine how the broadcast media could fight corruption and the challenges they face in doing so. The study was anchored in agenda-setting theory and adopted the integrative review method. The findings revealed that the broadcast media could fight corruption by consistently featuring corruption cases in their reports and using investigative journalism to uncover hidden cases of corruption. The study also found that institutions in Nigeria are either weak or compromised, posing a challenge to the fight against corruption because perpetrators may ultimately go unpunished. Media owners were found to use their media organisations to influence public opinion, suppress the truth, deny opposing views access to the media, disseminate false information, engage in character assassination and settle political scores. The findings further revealed that the safety and security of journalists covering corruption cases in Nigeria are not guaranteed. Corruption within the media, in the form of junkets, freebies and brown envelopes, was also identified as an obstacle to the fight against corruption. These findings imply that without strong institutions, the safety of journalists and a corruption-free media ecosystem, the media can hardly succeed in the fight against corruption in Nigeria. Therefore, for the broadcast media to make meaningful progress in combating corruption, policies and regulations are needed to strengthen institutions, curb undue ownership influence, and guarantee the safety and security of journalists.

Keywords: broadcast media, anti-corruption, crusade, Nigeria, watchdog

Introduction

Corruption remains a persistent governance and development challenge in Nigeria, with implications for public accountability, institutional effectiveness and citizens' trust in government (United Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023). Despite various legal, institutional and policy measures such as the formation of the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) aimed at curbing corrupt practices, the problem according to Enweremadu (2013) continues to attract public concern and sustained attention from government, civil society and the media. The persistence of corruption has consequently increased the importance of mechanisms capable of exposing wrongdoing, scrutinising the exercise of public authority and promoting accountability (Stapenhurst, 2000). Within this context, the mass media occupy an important position in democratic governance. Through news reporting, investigative journalism, documentaries, interviews, public affairs programmes and other forms of public-interest broadcasting, the media can draw attention to issues of public concern and provide platforms through which government institutions and public officials are subjected to public scrutiny (Norris, 2014). Investigative journalism is particularly relevant to this function because it



involves systematic inquiry into matters that may otherwise remain hidden from public attention. In this regard, broadcast media can provide visibility to corruption-related issues and facilitate public discussion of alleged wrongdoing.

The Nigerian media have undertaken various forms of corruption-related reporting and public enlightenment. Broadcast platforms, in particular, have the capacity to reach large and diverse audiences through radio and television programmes, news bulletins, investigative reports, documentaries, interviews and public affairs programming. Such content can increase public awareness of corrupt practices, encourage citizens to question official actions and create pressure for institutional responses. Existing literature has examined several dimensions of this relationship. For instance, Oyelaja and Akinwumi (2019) examined the contribution of the media to public awareness and accountability, while Okunna and Omenugha (2021) discussed the broader role of the media in Nigerian society. More recent work has also continued to examine media practices and emerging approaches to journalism in relation to public-interest issues (Eke et al., 2024). However, the literature does not present the watchdog role of broadcast media as an uncomplicated process (Adeyanju & Ojebode, 2018 UNESCO, 2022). Media ownership, political and commercial interests, limited financial and technological resources, professional constraints, journalist safety, restricted access to information and weak institutional responses can affect the extent to which media organisations perform their accountability functions. These challenges raise important questions about whether media exposure of corruption consistently translates into public accountability or institutional action. The effectiveness of the media therefore depends not only on their capacity to identify and report corruption but also on the professional, organisational, political and institutional conditions within which such reporting takes place.

Although existing studies (Dunu & Okafor, 2020) have examined media coverage of corruption, investigative journalism, public awareness and media accountability in Nigeria, the evidence remains dispersed across different studies, media platforms and dimensions of the problem. Consequently, there is a need to bring the available literature together to identify the patterns emerging from existing research, examine the conditions that facilitate or constrain the watchdog role of broadcast media, and identify areas requiring further investigation. A systematic synthesis is particularly useful because it can move the discussion beyond individual accounts of media performance towards a consolidated understanding of what existing research demonstrates, where findings converge or differ, and what gaps remain in the evidence. Against this background, this review examines the watchdog role of broadcast media in Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts. Specifically, it synthesises existing literature on the contribution of broadcast media to corruption awareness, investigative and accountability reporting, public participation and institutional scrutiny, while also examining the major challenges that constrain the effectiveness of their watchdog function. The review further identifies gaps in the existing literature and highlights areas for future research on broadcast journalism and anti-corruption communication in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory, which explains the role of the mass media in determining the prominence of issues in public discourse. The broader understanding of media influence on public attention has been discussed in communication scholarship through different perspectives on the relationship between media content, public perception and issue salience (Anaeto et al., 2008; Severin & Tankard, 2001). McQuail (1987) similarly recognises the capacity of mass communication to influence the relative importance attached to issues in society.



The intellectual foundation of agenda setting can be traced to Lippmann (1922), who argued that people often respond to pictures of reality constructed through mediated information rather than to events in their immediate environment. This proposition provided an important basis for understanding how media representations can shape the issues that receive public attention. McCombs and Shaw (1972) subsequently developed and empirically demonstrated the agenda-setting proposition, arguing that the media's selection and prominence of issues can influence the issues that audiences perceive as important. Agenda Setting Theory is principally concerned with the salience of issues rather than with determining precisely what audiences should think about those issues. The frequency with which an issue is reported, the prominence accorded to it and the consistency of media attention can contribute to its visibility in public discourse. Littlejohn and Foss (2009) explain this relationship in terms of the media's ability to direct public attention towards particular issues, while Eze (2016) similarly notes the role of the media in influencing the issues that receive public consideration.

The theory is relevant to this review because corruption is an issue that often requires sustained public attention before it can generate meaningful public scrutiny. Broadcast media provide opportunities for corruption-related matters to receive visibility through news reports, investigative programmes, documentaries, interviews and public affairs programmes. Where broadcasters consistently give prominence to alleged corrupt practices, abuse of public resources or failures of public institutions, such coverage can increase the salience of these issues within public discourse. In this sense, agenda setting provides a useful framework for examining how broadcast media contribute to the public visibility of corruption and related accountability concerns. However, agenda setting should not be treated as synonymous with investigative journalism or the watchdog role of the media. Investigative journalism involves the systematic pursuit and presentation of information that may not otherwise become publicly available, whereas the watchdog function concerns the scrutiny of those who exercise power and the promotion of accountability. Agenda setting helps explain a related but distinct dimension: how the issues uncovered, reported or selected by the media acquire prominence and remain visible within public discourse. The three processes may therefore intersect, but they should not be treated as conceptually identical.

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professional and institutional factors that may facilitate or constrain the effectiveness of broadcast media in promoting public accountability.

Research Method

The study adopted an integrative literature review method to synthesise existing scholarly literature on the watchdog role of broadcast media in Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts. An integrative review allows evidence from diverse forms of literature to be brought together to provide a broader understanding of a research problem and to identify patterns, gaps and areas requiring further investigation. Relevant literature was identified through searches of scholarly publications addressing broadcast media, investigative journalism, media accountability, corruption, anti-corruption communication and the watchdog role of the Nigerian media. The selected literature was reviewed thematically, with attention to the contribution of broadcast media to corruption awareness, public scrutiny and accountability, as well as the professional, organisational, political and institutional factors that constrain their watchdog function. The reviewed materials were critically examined and synthesised according to the major issues emerging from the literature rather than presented as individual study summaries. The method was considered appropriate because the review sought to integrate existing knowledge from different perspectives and identify areas of convergence, divergence and gaps in research on broadcast media and anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria.

Thematic Synthesis and Discussion

Agenda Setting and Public Visibility

Agenda-setting theory provides a useful starting point for understanding how broadcast media can make corruption a prominent public issue. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that media influence the importance audiences attach to issues through the frequency and prominence of their coverage. Applied to anti-corruption communication, this suggests that sustained reporting on alleged misappropriation of public funds, abuse of office and failures in public institutions can elevate corruption from an isolated news event to an issue of wider public concern. However, agenda-setting theory does not establish that increased media attention automatically produces public mobilisation, changes in political behaviour or institutional accountability. It explains the potential influence of media visibility on issue salience rather than guaranteeing particular social or political outcomes. Komolafe et al. (2019a), illustrates why this distinction matters, in their examination of corruption reporting during the 2015 general elections, they identified concerns about politically motivated coverage, sensationalism and the displacement of substantive accountability issues. Their subsequent examination of corruption coverage during the 2019 elections reported an increase in corruption-related reporting compared with 2015, while raising concerns about the depth of analysis given to the issues and their broader developmental implications (Komolafe et al., 2019b). These findings complicate the assumption that greater coverage necessarily strengthens anti-corruption efforts. Although the volume of reporting can increase the visibility of corruption, its contribution to accountability depends partly on whether coverage investigates underlying practices, examines evidence, contextualises allegations and follows up on institutional responses.



The distinction between visibility and accountability is also relevant to research on media accountability in Nigeria. Olukotun (2014), examining the media's role in Nigeria's Fourth Republic between 1999 and 2003, explored how the press challenged corruption and demanded accountability in public life. This provides a historical basis for recognising the media's watchdog potential while situating that role within the political and institutional conditions under which journalism operates. Research on newspaper coverage also provides comparative evidence for examining the difference between reporting that attracts public attention and journalism that sustains scrutiny. However, findings from newspaper studies should not be transferred directly to broadcast media without considering differences in format, audience engagement and news production. For broadcast media, therefore, the analytical issue is not simply how frequently corruption is reported, but how the issue is presented and sustained across news bulletins, interviews, documentaries, current-affairs programmes and investigative reports.

Investigative reporting contributes to the watchdog function

Investigative reporting contributes to the watchdog function of journalism by independently investigating suspected wrongdoing, verifying evidence and scrutinising the exercise of public power. However, the relationship between investigative journalism and accountability is not automatic. Stapenhurst (2000) argues that the media can contribute to anti-corruption efforts by exposing wrongdoing and informing public debate, while Norris (2014) situates watchdog journalism within the broader framework of public accountability. Nigerian research highlights the gap between this ideal and journalistic practice. Suleiman (2017) found that corruption coverage in Nigerian newspapers relied substantially on investigations initiated by official institutions rather than independent journalistic inquiries. Similarly, Gainaka et al. (2020) found that broadcasters' watchdog activities often involved reporting investigations initiated by external institutions, with ownership and economic pressures constraining independent scrutiny. These findings suggest that prominent corruption coverage does not necessarily demonstrate investigative independence, particularly when journalists depend on official sources for evidence and investigative leads.

Further evidence indicates that effective watchdog journalism requires both favourable institutional conditions and a professional commitment to independent scrutiny. Aja et al. (2024) found that journalists' perceptions of the watchdog role were associated with their performance of watchdog functions, suggesting that professional orientations also influence investigative practice. Suleiman (2026) likewise identified limitations in independent investigative reporting in Nigerian newspapers, although these findings cannot automatically be generalised to broadcast media. Taken together, the literature distinguishes the exposure of corruption from sustained accountability: official investigations can provide valuable information, but journalists must independently verify findings, question official explanations and follow up on alleged wrongdoing. For Nigerian broadcast media, investigative effectiveness therefore depends on editorial independence, adequate resources, professional capacity, access to reliable information and institutional responsiveness. Nevertheless, the limited broadcast-specific evidence indicates the need for further research before conclusions can be generalised across the sector.



Public Engagement and Explanatory Programming

Broadcast interviews, documentaries and public-affairs programmes can facilitate public engagement with corruption by making complex issues more accessible, providing platforms for competing perspectives and creating opportunities to question public officials. Their potential contribution extends beyond reporting allegations: explanatory programming can clarify how corruption occurs, identify its institutional and social consequences, and help audiences assess the adequacy of official responses. However, the availability of such programmes does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation or accountability; their contribution depends on the quality of evidence, editorial independence, accessibility of presentation and opportunities for public response. Holum (2023), for instance, examined citizen participation in Norwegian local government and found that government initiatives to encourage participation had no significant effect on actual participation. Although the study was not concerned with broadcast media or corruption, it provides a useful caution against assuming that the provision of opportunities for engagement automatically produces public involvement.

From an integrated perspective, explanatory programming should therefore be understood as a potential mechanism linking information provision to public understanding and civic scrutiny, rather than as direct evidence of corruption reduction. Interviews may enable citizens and specialists to interrogate official explanations, while documentaries can connect individual cases to broader institutional practices; public-affairs discussions can further sustain debate and bring neglected concerns into public view. Nevertheless, these formats can also reproduce official narratives or encourage superficial discussion when they rely heavily on elite sources, give insufficient attention to evidence or fail to follow up on allegations. The central issue is consequently not simply whether broadcast media provide platforms for discussion, but whether their programming supports informed scrutiny and meaningful public participation.

Ownership, Political and Commercial Influence

Media ownership and the political economy of news production are important structural considerations in assessing the capacity of broadcast media to scrutinise corruption. Ownership does not automatically determine editorial content; rather, its influence may operate through editorial policies, resource allocation, appointment decisions, source selection and implicit expectations about which issues should receive prominence. Ojo (2018), examining media ownership and market structures in Nigeria, situates the sustainability of news organisations within wider economic and political conditions. These conditions matter because financial insecurity and dependence on advertising or politically connected proprietors may limit the capacity of newsrooms to pursue investigations that threaten powerful interests. More directly, Ojebode's (2013) study of politician-businessperson-owned newspapers found that journalists' professional autonomy could be constrained by proprietors' overlapping political and economic interests. Although this evidence concerns newspapers rather than broadcasting, it illustrates how ownership interests can shape journalistic discretion without requiring overt censorship.

Professional Ethics, Journalist Safety and Institutional Response

Professional ethics, journalist safety and institutional accountability are interconnected conditions shaping the capacity of the media to investigate and report corruption. In Nigeria, the



practice commonly described as brown-envelope journalism raises concerns about the boundary between legitimate professional interactions and inducements that compromise editorial independence. Adegbola et al. (2025) provide more direct evidence from Nigeria, showing that public relations practitioners understand brown-envelope practices through economic, sociocultural and ethical considerations. Their qualitative findings indicate that cash inducements may be initiated by either journalists or public relations practitioners, complicating attempts to treat the practice solely as individual misconduct. This suggests that professional ethics must be considered alongside journalists' working conditions, organisational expectations and the transparency of media–source relationships.

Journalist safety and access to information constitute further conditions for effective public-interest reporting. UNESCO's (2022) global assessment documents threats including physical attacks, imprisonment, online harassment and impunity, noting that such pressures can encourage self-censorship. Although these findings are global rather than specific to Nigerian anti-corruption broadcasting, they demonstrate why protection and institutional accountability matter to independent journalism. In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) provide national evidence on corruption patterns and public experiences, offering important context for media scrutiny but not, by themselves, evidence of the effectiveness of journalism. The literature above suggests that ethical independence, journalist protection, access to reliable information and credible institutional follow-through are complementary rather than interchangeable conditions. Broadcast media can investigate allegations, make evidence public and sustain scrutiny; however, investigation, prosecution and sanctions depend on the powers and actions of relevant institutions. The extent to which these conditions shape anti-corruption reporting in Nigerian broadcasting requires further sector-specific empirical investigation.

Conclusion

This review synthesised existing literature on the watchdog role of broadcast media in Nigeria's anti-corruption efforts. The reviewed literature suggests that broadcast media contribute to anti-corruption efforts through four interrelated roles: watchdog scrutiny of public authority, investigative reporting that brings hidden information to public attention, agenda-setting that sustains the visibility of corruption-related issues within public discourse, and public engagement functions that provide platforms for debate and citizen participation. However, the literature also indicates that these contributions are constrained by several factors, including institutional weakness in bodies responsible for prosecution and sanctions, such as the ICPC, EFCC and the judiciary; concerns about journalists' safety and security; ownership influence and political and commercial pressures; limited resources and access to information; and unethical practices within the media, such as brown envelopes, junkets and freebies. Without stronger institutions, guarantees for journalists' safety, and a more ethical and independent broadcast media ecosystem, the capacity of broadcast media to translate the exposure of corruption into accountability remains limited.

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