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Investigative Journalism in Nigeria: The Role of Premium Times and Sahara Reporters

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the media have increasingly exposed high-profile cases of misconduct by public office holders, particularly certificate forgery and the violation of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Act. Such developments, if left unchecked, damage the country's reputation internationally. Political appointees, especially ministers, have featured prominently in these cases. Against this background, this study examines the role of investigative journalism in Nigeria, with particular reference to Premium Times and Sahara Reporters. A survey design was adopted to elicit respondents' insights and opinions on the phenomenon, with Enugu urban as the study location. The findings indicate that public concern over such cases has grown markedly over the period examined (2015–2025). The study concludes that a number of Nigerian public office holders occupy office with questionable educational credentials, and it recommends firm legal sanctions, including custodial sentences, for public office holders found to have forged certificates, as well as for those who collude with them.

KEYWORDS: Investigative journalism• Premium Times• Sahara Reporters• Public office holders• Certificate forgery

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Introduction

Across time, individuals have been tempted to cut corners or bend the rules for personal benefit. Some of these acts may not be strictly criminal, yet they offend common decency and morality, and those who commit them often try to hide them from the public. However, since such conduct recurs, particularly in public offices, public policies are needed to forestall or check it. Thus, in performing their surveillance function, the mass media are positioned to "blow the whistle." According to Agbese (2008), whistle-blowing in journalism is the act of reporting observed or perceived unethical misconduct by employees, management, directors, political office holders and other stakeholders of an institution or government, so that wrongdoing can be detected in time for corrective action. In this sense, the mass media are often the

originators of public-policy formulation, because they leak information, set the agenda and draw the government's attention to their reports. Investigative reporting is therefore central to the watchdog role of the mass media, since it is capable of exposing, and sometimes halting, misconduct by government officials, businesspeople or groups of individuals. Notable historical examples include the thalidomide scandal of the late 1950s and early 1960s, in which a drug marketed by a German pharmaceutical company caused severe birth defects in the children of women who took it during pregnancy; the Watergate scandal in the United States; and, in Nigeria, the certificate-forgery scandal involving a former Speaker of the House of Representatives (Agbese, 2008). These were landmark achievements of traditional-media investigative reporting. However, in the era of social media, the scope of investigative reporting has widened enormously, since almost anyone with a camera phone or another internet-enabled device can document wrongdoing and raise an alarm.

The Uniqueness of Investigative Journalism in Information Gathering and Reporting

Agbese (2008) describes investigative journalism as "the means by which the press discharges its duty to God and man." As far back as 1644, an English newspaper promised its readers that it "would discover the usual cheats in the great game of the kingdom," assuring its audience that its reporters would go undercover to dig up what was being hidden from the public (cited in Agbese, 2008). No journalist, however skilful, can expose official crime of great magnitude through routine reporting; rather, investigative reporters who cultivate insiders to obtain concrete, public-interest information are able to expose official fraud (Nwodu, 2006). Before the Watergate scandal, investigative reporting was not regarded as a specialised branch of journalism; after that landmark scoop, it became one of the most respected areas of mass communication, prompting scholars to develop definitions, descriptions and accounts of its functions. Nwabueze (2005) defines investigative journalism as the process of searching for facts and standing for the truth. Because it is concerned with fact-finding aimed at unveiling hidden truths that wrongdoers would prefer to keep from the public, Agbo and Eze (2003, cited in Obasi, 2011) observe that investigative journalism is a form of reporting in which the reporter, having identified or suspected a particular act of misconduct deliberately concealed by the culprit, makes a concerted effort to gather exhaustive information on the misdeed and report it. Investigative reporting thus involves the private effort of a journalist who acts as a detective to uncover matters hidden from the general public.

Investigative reporting may be described as cutting-edge journalism, because it can provide more facts than an ordinary straight-news report. It aims to correct social ills such as indiscipline, corruption, abuse of power, bad governance and poor leadership. In practice, investigation is not for the indolent, since it demands time and perseverance; nor is it for the greedy or those of questionable character who may yield to gossip or bribery. Rather, the investigative reporter must be willing to take considerable personal risk, driven by concern for the public interest and for the betterment of society. As "custodians of conscience," which is how Nwabueze (2011) describes investigative reporters, their duties involve exposing the immoral, the illegal and those who violate societal norms and values.

Investigative reporting is accountability reporting; it functions to unearth significant information about matters of public importance through non-routine information-gathering methods (Curtis, 1977). The required facts emerge from the way the process is conducted: in most cases, the investigator probes a single topic of public interest deeply, rather than pursuing many topics at once. This allows the reporter to be thorough in investigation and reportage. For serious crimes, political corruption, corporate misdeeds, institutional fraud and bad governance, the investigative reporter typically selects a single issue from the range of such problems. Another distinctive feature is the time invested, since some investigations extend over long periods; such enduring and painstaking searches for the truth have at times cost reporters their lives, while in other cases they have helped turn a society from bad to good.

Notable journalistic scoops include the American Watergate scandal; the toxic-waste dumping scandal at Koko, Delta State, in Nigeria; the controversy over the alleged missing ₦2.8 billion in NNPC oil funds during the regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976–1979), when General Muhammadu Buhari

served as Minister for Petroleum; and the Newswatch "Insight Team" report on the hidden agenda of General Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) to transition from military Head of State to President without a democratic election. It was in the course of such work that one of Nigeria's finest journalists, Mr Dele Giwa, was killed by a letter bomb. Comparable landmark cases include the thalidomide scandal and the certificate-forgery case involving a former Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Most investigative assignments are carried out by newspapers, magazines, wire services and freelance journalists. Even so, not every journalist undertakes such work; it is typically handled by senior, experienced journalists, mainly editors, trained in the craft of investigation. Uju (2010, cited in Nwabueze, 2011) laments the challenges facing Nigerian journalists in discharging their investigative duties, including fear of reprisal, the Official Secrets Act, the influence of powerful individuals, and a shortage of funds for painstaking investigation. Some investigative reporters, the author adds, lack training in modern methods of inquiry; some are predisposed to corruption owing to economic hardship; and others display an inferiority complex that deters them from confronting crimes or fraud involving highly placed individuals.

The Mass Media and the Law in the Discharge of the Investigative Function

Any account of the Nigerian mass media and the law must consider the relationship between the press and Nigeria's military heads of state during their transition programmes. Between 1984 and 1999, the politics of military intervention strongly shaped the development of the mass media. The period saw a succession of heads of state who came to power through coups and counter-coups, each attempting a transition programme. According to Obasi (2014), two months after taking office, General Muhammadu Buhari promulgated the Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Decree No. 4 of 1984, which took effect in March 1984; by July of that year, Mr Tunde Thompson and Mr Nduka Irabor had been convicted under the decree and jailed for one year each for publishing stories deemed to contravene it. The Buhari administration was overthrown in August 1985 by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, who soon repealed the decree. Little more than a year into his government, IBB's regime was implicated in the killing of Dele Giwa by letter bomb on 19 October 1986, apparently in response to the Newswatch style of investigative reporting, which the government found threatening. Giwa was the founding editor of the then-influential Newswatch magazine. The regime followed this with Decree No. 6 of 1987, which proscribed the magazine and froze its accounts for six months, instilling fear in journalists. The militarisation of politics continued, and when the ban on political activity was lifted between 1988 and 1989, the government created two parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). To forestall media attempts to derail the transition, the government revisited and reinforced earlier press restrictions. Between 1990 and 1993, when IBB was eased out in a palace coup he described as "stepping aside," several decrees, including Decree Nos. 35, 43, 48 and 85, were promulgated to muzzle the press in its investigative work. These decrees imposed stringent conditions for establishing newspapers and magazines, enabled the proscription of existing titles and the seizure of published copies, and provided for the arrest, detention and even jailing of working journalists.

Even with the return to civil rule, attacks on the press have persisted, and the much-discussed freedom of the press remains incompletely realised. Nigeria has passed the Freedom of Information Act, but concerns remain. According to Obasi (2014), freedom-of-information legislation comprises laws that guarantee access to information held by government at all levels; however, Nigeria's Act lacks some of the provisions needed to guarantee such access. The Freedom of Information Bill was the longest-running private member's bill in the National Assembly, from 1999 until it was signed into law in 2011. During that long passage, several important provisions were removed, including those that would have strengthened reporters' right to know what government and its officers do day to day. The Act retains broad exemptions, including "top secret" classifications, which critics argue can shield corruption and poor governance. The exemptions cover national-security matters classified as "confidential," "secret" or "top secret," the last being the highest level of classification.

Governments often argue that disclosure of such material could cause grave damage to national security. Pember and Calvert (2005) cite Brant Houston, then Executive Director of the American organisation Investigative Reporters and Editors, who argued that "the press has the responsibility to bring the news to the people if a democratic system is expected to function." Houston observed that, to do so, investigative journalists sometimes use information-gathering techniques that could expose them to civil or criminal liability, and he advocated strong laws, such as shield laws, allowing journalists to refuse to disclose their sources when called before a court. Such protections, he argued, would recognise the press as a vital group in the fight against corruption and poor leadership. In Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, various media laws have constrained the investigative function of journalists, and conflicts persist even in the administration of the Freedom of Information Act.

Ngwu et al. (2014) argue that Nigeria's Official Secrets Acts of 1962 and 1990 gave governments and their allies cover to perpetrate wrongdoing, and that citizens' fundamental rights are abused in the name of protecting documents classified under Section 1(a) and (b) of the Official Secrets Act. Experts expected that, with the emergence of the Freedom of Information Act, the Official Secrets Acts would be superseded, since Section 1(1) of the Act gives everyone the right to request information from public and private institutions in Nigeria, and subsection (3) gives everyone the right to institute legal action if such information is denied. Kene and Andossar (2011, cited in Ngwu et al., 2014) contend that the Act poses a serious threat to national security, citing Section 1(1) and (3). Okafor and Obi (2012, cited in Ngwu et al., 2014) disagree, arguing that the Act poses no such threat because its exemption clauses protect national security. Until these conflicting views are resolved, Nigerian investigative journalists cannot make full use of the Act.

Whistle-Blowing Policy in the Era of Social Media: Any Control?

Social media are boundless channels that admit all comers, trained and untrained, provided the user can post content online through one of the available platforms. As an open channel, social media can easily be abused or misused, since their users are not subject to an organised editorial control system like that of the print or broadcast media, where editors screen what reaches the public. According to Okeke and Nwachukwu (2013), the traditional media filter information and report only what they consider fit for public consumption; with social media, however, this long-established gatekeeping function is being transformed. Today's audiences expect to choose what they read, see or hear, and many believe they should also be able to contribute content and share pictures and videos. Journalists, in particular, use social media to reach and interact with their audiences and colleagues.

Olusesan et al. (2014) hold that social media are used for social interaction through highly accessible and scalable communication techniques. They are, in effect, instruments through which users seek and share information and interact with one another, in a well-developed two-way communication model characterised by immediacy and frequency. Social media are significant for the rapid dissemination of information and as sources of leads for investigative reporting. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter) can present breaking news as text, images and video. Kalness (2014, cited in Olusesan et al., 2014) describes Facebook and Twitter as essential tools for political journalism, and a Pew Research Center study (2013) found Facebook to be the social-media network most widely used for accessing news among adults.

The Federal Government's aim in introducing the whistle-blowing policy was to stem rising corruption in the political, economic and social life of the country. In this context, social media stand out as an important channel for obtaining information about corrupt tendencies, practices and proceeds. In debates on information policy in the developing world, some scholars note that the state and the market are the principal forces hindering the development of adequate information systems, and that some African governments are reluctant to allow their citizens to make independent decisions, unlike in settings where citizens are empowered to scrutinise government and officials, gathering and storing information that keeps the public abreast of government conduct. Hamelink (1999), for instance, calls on African

leaders to adopt new paradigms for information gathering that facilitate empowerment and encourage a corruption-free society. Without a citizenry that enjoys free speech and a free press, the use of a whistle-blowing policy to keep government officials within acceptable bounds may prove illusory.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Media Dependency Theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur in 1976. The theory was conceived to reconcile the limited-effects and powerful-effects models of mass media, and it holds that people have varying dependencies on the media, which differ from person to person, group to group and culture to culture. It emphasises the tripartite relationship among media, audience and society. Among these, several factors increase or decrease the degree of media dependency. For example, in times of great uncertainty, such as under conditions of poor governance, people depend more heavily on the media to stay informed. In such circumstances, the media should intensify their role of providing information about government policies and programmes, so that the public can understand, monitor and respond to government where necessary.

The theory has been applied in similar studies. Mojaye (2013) cites Baran and Davis (2003) to the effect that the media can have powerful effects, especially when their content provides individuals with unique information linked to personal goals, and that the more a person depends on the media to meet their needs, the more important the media become in that person's life. Black and Bryant (1995, cited in Mojaye, 2013) describe the theory as holistic and integrated, since it incorporates psychological, sociological, uses-and-gratifications and media-effects perspectives. Given the similarities between those studies and the present one, Media Dependency Theory is considered appropriate for this study.

Methodology

This study adopted the quantitative survey method, consistent with its objective of examining investigative journalism in Nigeria and the contribution of the mass media, specifically Premium Times and Sahara Reporters, to accountability in public life. The study treated two measurable dimensions: the role of the mass media and the whistle-blowing/accountability function that depends on the media for its effectiveness. The survey method allowed the researcher to use measurable instruments, a questionnaire supported by interviews, to test the proposition that accountability for public office holders depends substantially on the mass media.

The study population comprised residents of Enugu urban, in Enugu State, South-East Nigeria. A probability (simple random) sampling scheme was used so that adult residents had an equal chance of selection. Using the sampling procedure, a sample size of 380 was determined, and 380 copies of the questionnaire were produced and administered by trained field assistants across Enugu urban. Of these, 368 were returned, coded and analysed.

The Contribution of Premium Times and Sahara Reporters to Investigative Reporting in Nigeria

Premium Times

Premium Times is one of Nigeria's leading platforms for fast, reliable breaking news and in-depth investigative reporting. It was launched in 2011 in Abuja as an online medium noted for investigative journalism. Dapo Olorunyomi is its co-founder, publisher and chief executive, and it is widely regarded as one of Nigeria's most trusted news organisations and a reference point for African investigative journalism. Musikilu Mojeed is its editor-in-chief. Premium Times is a multimedia news organisation.

Sahara Reporters

SaharaReporters.com is a pioneering news website that encourages citizen journalists to report ongoing corruption and malfeasance around them, whether in public or private offices. The platform specialises in exposing high-profile corruption so that the public can see how public office holders and

other influential figures conduct themselves. Sahara Reporters was established in 2006 by Omoyele Sowore, a pro-democracy campaigner, human-rights activist, writer and politician.

In the case of Premium Times and Sahara Reporters, readers are drawn by the outlets' commitment to exposing the corrupt and fraudulent practices of public officers. These two platforms provide readers with deep insight into wrongdoing in public offices, which is why many Nigerian readers, online and offline, prefer them to outlets that merely report surface events. Both champion evidence-based investigative journalism in Nigeria. On why readers differ in their choice of newspapers, Turinskaya Sloboda (1967) argued that readers' interests are shaped by the social and democratic agenda, and that people prefer particular newspapers in order to uphold a shared value system within their community and to build on their past experience in line with their cognitive interests.

Case Studies in Nigeria (2015-2025)

The work of Premium Times and Sahara Reporters in recent times, particularly between 2015 and 2025, in exposing incompetence, certificate forgery and the violation of the NYSC's mandatory one-year service has endeared the outlets to their readers. Concern over the use of questionable educational credentials to obtain elective and appointive office has attracted particular public attention since 2015, although such cases also predate that period. Notable examples include the following:

1. Kemi Adeosun, Minister of Finance under President Buhari, was accused of presenting a forged NYSC exemption certificate and resigned in September 2018.
2. Adebayo Shittu, Minister of Communications under President Buhari, was reported not to have undertaken the NYSC scheme after graduating from the University of Ife in 1978, although he was not accused of presenting a forged NYSC certificate.
3. Hannatu Musawa, Minister of Art, Culture and the Creative Economy under President Tinubu, was reported to have still been serving in the NYSC at the time of her appointment. The Nigerian Bar Association filed a suit seeking her removal and the nullification of her NYSC certificate, but the court held that the plaintiffs lacked the legal standing to bring the case.
4. Stella Oduah, Minister of Aviation under President Jonathan, was embroiled in a long-running controversy over her NYSC status. NYSC sources indicated that she was mobilised in the 1982/83 service year and deployed to Lagos State but did not complete the service; in her affidavit and a police extract, she stated that her certificate had been lost rather than forged.

An earlier case is that of Hon. Ibrahim Salisu Buhari, Speaker of the House of Representatives (3 June 1999 to 23 July 1999) under President Olusegun Obasanjo, who was exposed by investigative journalists for presenting a forged University of Toronto degree certificate during his election and screening. He resigned, was convicted of forgery and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with the option of a fine; he paid the fine and was later granted a state pardon by President Obasanjo. The list of prominent Nigerian politicians and public office holders whose academic qualifications have been questioned by the media is long and troubling. Beyond the outlets named above, other serious news platforms also engage in investigative journalism. Among them is Peoples Gazette, which investigated the alleged certificate-forgery case involving a former minister, Uche Nnaji.

Moral questions have long concerned many Nigerians and have prompted reflection on national values. There is a need to embrace probity and accountability in national life, whether as a public office holder or a private individual. Doing so would help to reduce corrupt practices such as money laundering, financial mismanagement, fraud, sexual harassment and human trafficking. It is partly in response to such problems that investigative journalists, working with whistle-blowers and assisted by the Freedom of Information Act, act to bring the truth to public attention.

Discussion of Findings

The findings were both revealing and troubling. Only the results most pertinent to the study's objective are reported here. A substantial proportion of respondents held that many public office holders occupy office with forged certificates, and that security agencies and legislators are insufficiently rigorous in screening appointees. This group regarded the media as a powerful instrument for uncovering certificate scandals and expressed the view that the media should be given the latitude to expose offenders. A number of respondents reported that they had lost confidence in government. Another group agreed that the mass media, including social media, have an important role in making government accountable and responsive, and affirmed the capacity of the media to help combat corruption, while cautioning that measures are needed to curb the excesses of social media. A section of respondents, especially interviewees, expressed concern about governance dominated by office holders of questionable credentials, arguing that this does not foster healthy national development. In their view, where public confidence in government has been eroded by fraudulent conduct, investigative journalism can help persuade government to change course, so that citizens can be served by administrations founded on verifiable records and genuine academic credentials.

Conclusion

This study examined the rising incidence of alleged certificate forgery among Nigerian public office holders, particularly within the political class, and the corresponding role of investigative journalists in exposing it. It concludes that some public offices are occupied by individuals without adequate educational credentials; that security agencies and legislators do not always rigorously screen nominees for sensitive public offices before confirmation, sometimes merely endorsing the list submitted to them; and that the Nigerian press remains active in its watchdog role, using investigative methods to expose fraud in public offices, including scandals involving educational credentials.

Recommendations

To address the problem of certificate forgery among public office holders, this study makes the following recommendations:

1. The press should be granted full access to information concerning public office holders through the Freedom of Information Act (2011). Full implementation of the Act would reduce the scope for concealment in public office.
2. Government should ensure that any public office holder found to have obtained an appointment with forged academic credentials faces the full weight of the law, including prosecution for forgery. Enforcing such consequences would serve as a deterrent.
3. Any institution whose certificate is forged should be able to seek legal redress, including damages for reputational harm.
4. Security and screening agencies should be held accountable where they fail to properly verify the credentials of nominees submitted to them for screening.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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