MEDIA, GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY AND CITIZENS’ ENGAGEMENT: PRE-REQUISITES FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN STATES

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Abstract

The paper explored the relationship between government accountability, media accountability and citizen’s engagement towards holding government accountable to the people. The normative expectations underlying these concepts were contrasted with professional journalistic roles and standards which sometimes fall short of public expectation towards enhancing economic development. The research overall reveals that the media do have an impact on audience, but this largely depends on a complex set of individual or social circumstances. Finally the paper recommended among other issues, that the media should consider the aspect of providing platform for citizens engagement as a critical reason for their being.

There is a growing interest in academics, in ways in which media can be, and are, effectively harnessed by local communities and networks in various states to hold governments and corporations accountable. Harmful secretive and extractive trade practices of global corporations that affect mostly the already dispossessed, economically weak, and socially marginalized communities within developing states, can be conducted to the disadvantage of those communities.

The idea of democracy, even in states whose governments continue to resist a more open and participatory form of governance, is a powerful force that inspires people to take on a more active role in public life. However, many of these emerging democracies seemed to fall short of some of the basic standards that define democratic rule. These states still grapple with issues of irregular voting procedures, corruption, inefficiency and autocratic styles of government. The fact that most of these
democracies are African states, inequality and poverty remain severe obstacle to the
development of Africa.

It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper seeks to look at the issues that are involved in media and citizens engagement in holding government accountable, this being a pre-requisite for economic development of African states. It is important to note here that economic development is depended on a sound political culture. Therefore, the paper will adopt as its focus, political development, which invariably is the superstructure for economic development. The focus will be narrowed to the Nigerian situation.

**Government Accountability**

Though all governments-democratic or authoritarian-owe a duty to deliver a minimum public goods, in order to avoid widespread social unrest, electoral democracy provides strong institutional incentives for political officials to be accountable to their citizens. This shows that there is a form of relationship between the government and the governed. Mequail (1993:81) observed that

> “since media operate in societies in which power is extremely deployed and unevenly distributed between individuals, groups and classes, and since media are invariably related in some ways to the prevailing structure of political and economic power, several questions arise as to the nature of this relationship”.

These questions, in his views relate to ownership, access, and control of the factors that tend to limit or enlarge the media.

Similarly, Voltmer (2007:2) asserted that “since elections are the main mechanism to allocate power in democratic systems, they link the self-interest of politicians with the requirement to act in the interest of the populace”.

She argued that whether or not voting can function as an effective mechanism to enforce government accountability depends on a complex set of both institutional and cultural conditions. Such conditions include: choice of electoral system, professionalism in public administration and the independence of the judiciary.

It follows, therefore that, the ability and willingness of the citizens to engage in political life alongside the quantity of public communication, play an important part in strengthening the link between those in power and the governed.

**Media Accountability**

The citizens can only effectively use their power to enforce good governance, if they have reliable information from the media. Since the media are the main source
of information and vital link between the government and citizens, they are an indispensable precondition for both government accountability and social accountability.

The media are also expected to provide a forum where a broad range of voices—opposition parties, civil society groups and ordinary citizens—can express alternative views, (Mcquail, 2003) As the Fourth Estate of the Realm, the media is located alongside the other branches of government as far as roles of checks and balances concerned.

It is pertinent to note here that these roles of the media are based on the assumption that the media act in the best interest of the public. However, there is apparent contradiction between the notion of media accountability and the principle of freedom of the press. This became manifest when the social responsibility theory came out as a result of the Hutchin Commission on the Freedom of the Press in 1947. The theory posits that the media have a right to criticize the government and other institutions, but they also have the responsibility to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to the society’s needs and interests (Mcquail, 1993).

Voltmer (2007) also in apparent allusion to this contradiction asserted that any obligation to produce certain goods and to adhere to certain quality standards restricts the media’s degree of freedom in making their choices. Again libertarian theorists also deny any such obligation. They argue that it threatens the independence of the press and might even invite government interference. Lippman (1997) in supporting this view argued that the press is not a political institution and has no stake in organizing public opinion.

However other scholars picked holes in the above views. Barendt (1985) is one of such scholars. He argued that press freedom is a right that exists for a purpose and is justified by the benefits it delivers to the society as a whole. Although it can be argued that the notion of media accountability can be misused by those in power, the media are responsible for their behavior and its consequences. To this, (Mequail 2003:171) Pointed out that “the principle of media accountability not only involves restrictions and obligations, but also calls for measures to strengthen the media’s independence from government, to ensure sufficient resources or to provide access rights to information.”

The role of the media so far discussed is from a normative perspective, that is, how they ought to perform. Normative roles, however, tell us little about the day-to-day reality of what obtains in real life. Research into news and journalism indicates that, for
various structural reasons, the media’s ability to fulfill their democratic roles often does not live up to ideal expectations. One important reason for this in the view of Tuchman (1972:660) is the “reliance of the media on official sources.” He reasoned that to provide their news stories with authoritative backing, journalists prefer to quote high-ranking politicians, rather than, for example, civil society groups, the validity of whose claim is often difficult to establish.

A case in point in this regard is the media reportage of the state of health of the Nigerian economy. While a section of the Nigerian media opposed to the present administration of Goodluck Jonathan would cast negative headline about the state of the economy, the other section would give it a clean bill of health. One common thing however, is that both divides do not usually quote independent and dependable sources. The other would quote the minister of finance and the economy. Instead of basing on empirical statistical sources, the “opposition” media would rather consider such mundane factors as the inability of the federal Government to meet up her cash flow demands, as an indicator to prove the bad condition of the economy.

Again, the Nigerian media’s penchant for easily abandoning a cause they well started to pursue, is a thing of great concern. The coverage of the Nigerian media during the subsidy protest of January 2012, is a recent example of the failure of the press to act as a watchdog and to question the credibility of government policies. The federal government announced the withdrawal of subsidy on petroleum products. The civil society groups roared. The press provided the platform. Government was forced to retain ‘partial’ subsidy, with a promise to use the subsidy funds to better the lots of the common man. The question, however, is, how has the media been able to follow up the issue as to be able to know for instance, what has accrued to the three tiers of government, and how well has the government applied the fund? This development illustrate, a general pattern of the relationship between journalists and their sources.

Blumler and Gurevitch(1995) state that the watchdog role plays much lesser role in political reporting than its prominence as a journalistic ideal might imply. They assert that in the daily routine of news production, the interaction between journalists and politicians is characterized by a high degree of co-operation, frequently even a symbiotic relationship, where each side benefits from its respective counterpart. With this notion in mind, journalists often regard adversarialism as an unnecessary disruption of this relationship. They see it as capable of blocking their access to government officials and the chance of obtaining off the record background information. Thus their greatest consideration is no longer holding government accountable, but economic gains of the media organization.
The Media: Platform for Citizens’ Engagement

Studies about media effects on audience are one of the key areas in the field of communication studies. The array of literature is devoted to understanding the media’s influence on political knowledge. One of such is the agenda setting function.

**Agenda setting function**: The mass media is often looked at as having the power to set agenda for public discuss. Dominick (1993) looked at agenda setting as the ability to choose and emphasise certain topics, thereby causing the public to perceive these issues as important. The agenda setting function of the media offers citizens the opportunity of having a voice on issues of public importance. In shedding more light on this however, he averred that the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, they are usually successful in telling people what to think about.

Folarin (1998:68) in apparent agreement with the above viewpoint said orally that the “elements involved in agenda setting include: the quantity or frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports through headline, live display, pictures and layout in newspapers and magazines, timing on radio and TV; the degree of conflict generated in the reports and cumulative media effect over time”

The above viewpoint is aptly exemplified in the recent scandal rocking the Nigeria’s Aviation Minister, Ms Stella Oduah. An on line news media, Sahara Reporters, had blown the whistle about the fraud over the purchase of two bullet proof cars by an agency under her supervision. It was alleged that the cars’ prices were grossly inflated. Since the revelation, Nigerian media took up the issue, thus giving a platform for the citizens to have their say.

The author wants to establish is the fact that the agenda setting function of the media, gives platform for the citizens to engage the government thus, bringing to the fore corrupt practices capable of retarding economic development of the nation.

**Conclusion/Recommendations**

The relationship between the media, government accountability, and the role of the citizen in engaging the media as a tool to hold government accountable was extensively explored. These roles, the study observed, are necessary in enhancing economic development of African states.

In analyzing the role of the media, the paper found out that lack of ability to sustain her searchlights on issues that come to the fore, is the bane of the media of developing nations. It revealed that this weakness has constituted an obstacle to sustained media ‘war’ which often gives leverage to corruption.
On the strength of the above conclusion, therefore the following recommendations become imperative:

1. Effective political education of the citizenry by civil society groups, to make them aware of their rights and power in holding government accountable, is recommended.

2. The tenets of Access to Information should be clearly enshrined in the constitutions of developing nations. This will help provide access to government information which is a critical factor in checking on corrupt practices.

3. The media on their part should consider the issue of providing platform for citizens engagement as one of the critical reason for their being.

References


