



The Roles of Newspapers Ownership Pattern and Access to Governmental Information in Framing of Issues of Corruption in Sudan

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Abstract

Corruption is a global threat to state efficiency which is common to both developed and developing countries alike. However, corruption is more evident in developing countries such as; Sudan and its ravaging effects are particularly apparent in Sudan. However, the media contributes largely to the success of democracy in today's world. They carry a large database of information, along with their content and analyses, which could be a useful source for law makers to legislate laws and policies and for voters to choose their governments. As such, this paper set out to address the issue of corruption in Sudan within the context of Sudanese press by focusing on how media ownership and access to information influence the Sudanese press frames the coverage of issues of corruption in Sudan. This study therefore proposes a content analysis of Sudanese newspaper on their coverage of the issues of corruption. As with every other research, the limitation of this study is that, it is a conceptual paper, hence no empirical findings have been reported. Therefore, an empirical study into this issue will help researchers to explore how far the press or media in Sudan are capable of addressing anti-corruption issues in the country.

Keywords: Newspapers; Ownership Patterns; Access to Government Information; Corruption Issues; Sudan.

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1. Introduction

Sudan is an extremely corrupt nation [1] where most endemic forms of corruption are deeply rooted. Sudan ranked 177th out of 183, scoring 1.6 on a 10-point scale of highly corrupt nations. In the area of governance, too, Sudan performed extremely poor and scored less than 10 on a 100-point scale of the 2010 World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators. Even in the citizen's survey of 2011 Global Corruption Barometer, 67% believed that there was a rise in corruption in Sudan during the last three years prior to the survey. Reports [2] have also confirmed that Sudan has failed to confront corruption owing to its weak administration, lack of political will and the blurred distinction between the state and ruling party. For instance, according to [3] which has surveyed nations for imparting political and civil rights and freedoms, to its citizens, including freedom of the press, Sudan is classified as "worst of worst" among the worst 12 countries of the whole world.

Media contributes largely to the success of democracy in today's world. They carry a large database of information, along with their content and analyses, which could be a useful source for law makers to legislate laws and policies and for voters to choose their governments [4, 5, 6]. Moreover, media is renowned for playing a crucial role in helping people fight against corruption. Media can also assist prosecution agencies in the investigation of corruption incidents [7] popularly known for their watch dog functions, media thus can contribute usefully to fight corruption and promote good governance [8]. Mass media as a channel of information dissemination have long served as means of connecting individuals, government and the world at large [9]. From economical and financial to political, health, social and judicial issues, mass media have played a strategic role in shaping the reality and affecting world view of issues. This obviously is an evidence of the powers associated with the mass media. [10] points out that mass media have a strong effect when they create social reality through their framing of images of the real world in a predictable and patterned way, which is now becoming an indispensable model for framing reality.

For instance, [11] illustrated the media framing in action when media practitioners revealed that reporting news and stories related to crime is not only an evidence of reporters' academic skills in his field but also reflects the true picture of the work environment of media personnel. Journalists or media personnel are educated and trained to search 'scoop' and present it to readers through their rhetoric, in such a manner that it will arouse their interest to know more, and also to create a sensation for a while. The editorial staff are responsible to monitor and regulate all such 'scoops' coming as individual contributions of newspaper reporters. Explaining further, [11] point out a few more determinants that play an important role in the selection of final news to be published, for instance the ruling elite controls and filter (censors) the news; the academic institutions and techno-bureaucrats investigate the writing skills while the police and the public play key roles in creating the way the news is presented. In this context, this study set out to explore how ownership patterns and access to governmental information affect Sudanese newspapers' framing of news especially their depiction of criminality, corruption and perverted criminals.

Corruption is a global threat to state efficiency which is common to both developed and developing countries alike [12, 13]. However corruption is more evident in developing countries and its ravaging effects are particularly felt in Africa, which unfortunately has earned the status of the most corrupt continent of the world

[13, 14]. Corruption lies at the core of poor governance and accountability [15] as it hinders budget balance, efficient governance of expenditure and mismanagement of the budgetary functions [12] as well as overall delivery of public goods and services [14]. In addition, corruption undermines social values as individuals become more at ease with corrupt practices since they see such as easier means of survival and more lucrative means of wealth acquisition compared with the legitimate means [14]. Corruption has thus led to major setbacks in overall progress of many developing countries in Africa. A typical case is Sudan which, in spite of rapid growth of its oil sector among several other sources of national wealth, is classified amongst the world's most poor and corrupt countries [16, 13, 17, 18, 19] Likewise, Sudan was classified with zero points and occupied the bottom position along with Sao Tome, Democratic Republic of Congo and Equatorial Guinea in the conducted with Sudan and 84 other countries, The factors which contributed to this state of corruption and abuse of public funds in Sudan included the lack of efficient governance and control in managing public financial system, absence of transparency in government's performance, lack of law enforcement and regulatory bodies, lack of checks and balances on procurement of funds, untrained and unskilled staff to keep accounts and maintain audits and above all poor wages of public sector workers [20, 21]. As pointed out by [14] however, once corruption becomes entrenched in a given society, its negative effects continue to increase.

This suggests that the several factors contributing to corruption in Sudan will create more avenues for corruption to continue to multiply and thrive in the country. It therefore becomes of utmost importance for concerted efforts to be targeted at addressing corruption in the country. Just as it is important to have the knowledge of factors causing corruption, the investigation of ways of combating corruption is equally imperative [14]. Studies have identified government transparency and accountability as well as media sensitization, press freedom and citizens' rights to information as some of the major ways of curbing corruption [14, 15, 22]. Given the role of the mass media in framing social reality, the present study focuses on the coverage of issues of corruption by focusing on the roles of ownership patterns and access to governmental information by the Sudanese Press in influencing their framing of corruption related stories.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Newspaper Framing

Recent studies have shown that framing of news content does not only reduce certain considerations but also influence the interpretation of news contents such that they influence an individual's belief [23]. This is in addition to the fact that a growing number of studies have shown that framing influences public opinion [24]. Although the main thesis of framing theory postulates multiple meaning from different perspectives. In addition, framing refers to defining and interpreting the media effects on developing public consciousness for political issues. However, the underlying thesis of framing theory is that, framing is a process of conceptualizing issues or manipulating thoughts about an issue towards a new meaning [25]. Specifically, a frame can also be considered as a message or communication that hints at reality and unfolds various perspectives of a reality [26]. Frames are also defined as shapes of clarification meant to categorize information and process it professionally. Frames thus stress upon certain elements of reality and drive others as insignificant [27]. Reference [28] Defines a frame as the important element related to the news story that presents a situation and interprets the issue by

choice, “exclusion emphasis and elaboration”. The term “framing” has been commonly used in diverse paths like psychology, communication, sociology or management. Hence, the reason why there is a plethora definitions for framing [29].

The usage of frames in media discourse has in the past decade has become a virtual business. Previous studies have studied media framing for multifarious purposes. For instance, to identify issues and their definitions; to calculate the amount of media coverage across its outlets and to examine variants of media [30]. Reference [31] noted that, the concept of frames has gained significance in various academic fields such as politics, sociology and communication.

Moreover, framing theory has also assumed various approaches like agenda-setting and cultivation theory which are very popular in the field of media studies [32]. Examining news framing impacts is imperative especially because it provides researcher an instrument to interpret how a small but regular developments in an issue or an event can potentially lead to big changes in public opinions or some other significant consequences [25].

2.2 Ownership Patterns of Newspaper in Sudan

According to [33] there are 49 printed (hard copy) newspapers in Sudan owned by government, private companies, ruling party and opposition parties. The nature of the media ownership in Sudan is shared with government having total control over the broadcast media and the privately owned press [34, 35, 36, 37, 38]. Subsequently, the Sudanese government employs the broadcast media as mouthpiece and for political propaganda [38].

Reference [39] who examined patterns of media ownership in 97 countries also found that while media are generally owned and controlled by either government or private families, those owned by government are associated with less press freedom and other rights. According to these scholars, the adverse effects of government ownership and control in terms of political and economic freedom are more dominant for newspapers than television houses. [5] in another study, investigated the quality of political news coverage and its implications for the informed voters in making political decisions. The study used original data from the news coverage of rival media houses for the year 2004, and examined the function of ownership structure and market context. The author argues that the quality of the information found in political news is influenced by media ownership and market contexts. This article further exposes the relationship between media organizations and the news content they produce. It also provides an answer to such common arguments raised by politicians and scholars who were debating upon the impact of media ownership on the quality of political news coverage. So far there was no empirical evidence to support such conclusions but this study has offered a theoretically coherent answer to this question whether corporate media ownership and market context influence news coverage in political matters. This study is also a major contribution as it adds to the theoretical domain related to the behavior of media firms. Its findings also prove that public corporate ownership is negatively related to political election coverage.

Reference [40] in a recent study draw attention to two closely related dimensions, namely media ownership,

either state or private, and media bias, which concerns with media misreporting the news in favor of government interests. The study proved that media ownership influences media bias but media ownership itself is also equally endogenous to the media bias. This dichotomy leads to a fundamental issue related to media content that what happens when media bias reduces the informational content from the news, and makes it difficult for people to make decisions [41]. A further impact of media bias is that it reduces media consumption in two ways: first, the media bias lessens the government's propaganda since citizens ignore such biased news and cannot be influenced by it; second, media bias reduces advertising revenue which is a big loss to the government, regardless of whether the media are private or state owned.

Reference [41] observe that media bias is greater in autocracies than democracies, and attempt to prove that with the democratization process, the media bias in both state and privately-owned media reduces. They showed how citizens preferred media bias and get mobilized even when it is not individually rational, this theory is built upon two models popular in political economy: first, it follows a bargaining relationship between a politician and a media institution, an approach pioneered by [42]. Second model is built upon a large and comprehensive body of work that attempts to explain the origins of media bias. Such a distinction also often refers to "demand-side" and "supply-side" of media bias. Besley and Prat's models project the government as a strategic actor and media as an agency to show political accountability. Their research also serves three distinct purposes: First, it shows media ownership as endogenous therefore media freedom is adverse to advertising revenue; second, it presents the government role as "regime type," showing how media freedom depends on citizens' preferences; third, it gives importance to general consequences of citizens' actions.

This theoretical framework is also closely related to several other works like [43] whose research model requires citizens to use the information reported by the media but be willing to face the outcome which depends on the conditions in the environment. Reference [44] a recent work focused on the influence of mass media on politics and policy; a study that used survey method to study four main themes: transparency, capture, informative coverage, and ideological bias.

Reference [45] study examines media ownership and its impact on media independence and pluralism in the context of Poland. This study looks at the media ownership in this European nation with three perspectives: first the normative framework and media policies; second, description of media ownership structures; and third, portrayal of media diversity and pluralism. With the normative perspective, it was observed that media ownership patterns followed regulations and there exists such provisions that discouraged such political and economic interests that might be vested as a normative goal of media pluralism.

Finally, there is another study by [46] who explored the ownership issue from both theoretical and policy perspectives on the content of newspaper. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on the impact of ownership on the content and several studies have cited mixed results. Reference [46] have however examined the diversity issues from different academic background. They compared newspaper diversity with different ownership and used content analysis method to analyze the influence of ownership on news coverage. The findings revealed that elements like story sources, subjects' types, links etc. are different in the high ownership group from those of low ownership group, while the length of articles, political dimension, and the number of quotation have no

difference between them. Similarly, it was concluded that high ownership group was more focused on politics in comparison to low ownership group though this group experienced more diversity (program diversity), higher number of subjects and the link sources.

2.3 Access to Governmental Information

Reference [47] found that, access to information can be seen with three perspectives: physical, intellectual, and social. Physical access stands for “the physical structures that contain information, the electronic structures that contain information, and the procedures to getting information can be affected by geographical, technological and economic factors. Intellectual access means to understand information as contained in documents, and to see “how the information is categorized, organized, displayed, and represented” [48]. This access can be affected by a person’s physical or cognitive traits, his linguistic skills, and technological literacy. It is often observed that if physical access gets enlightened or maligned by external factors, the intellectual access is influenced by the individual’s internal characteristics. Finally, social access stands for an individual’s social environment, his social norms and the external views that one accesses the information for [47, 48].

Reference [49] laid a few reasons arguing right to information essential in democracy. First and foremost reason is that the access to information allows “citizens to make responsible, informed choices” and not remain in “ignorance or misinformation”. Second, access to information “ensures that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them”. For its compliance, it is necessary that law must be strong enough to keep a check on the regulations and practices in order to strengthen independent media. Finally, if media is independent, it can assist in holding transparent elections providing candidates access to information in the form of reporting “relevant issues in a timely, objective manner [50].

The media thus assist modern democracies to advance forward. The media with its news analysis and editorial content provides all the required information that help lawmakers and voters to take decisions [4]. However a possibly bias in media is a cause of worry for the economists [51]. The reason is that in many places where we talk of independent media or freedom of press, the government sponsors the largest advertisements in the media often have control over the content of the media. It happens sometimes that a few investigative reporters talk about increased government accountability to lower corruption, which is often a direct attack on government agencies [43]. For instance, [51] carried out a study of four newspapers in Argentina that reported on first page government corruption during the period 1998-2007. The study cited examples of corruption and correlated them with the extent to which each newspaper is a recipient of government advertising. The correlation was found negative. It was found that one standard deviation increase in monthly government advertising (0.26 million pesos of 2000) will reduce the monthly coverage of the government’s corruption scandals by 0.31% on the front page, or 25% of a standard deviation in the coverage. Overall, the study proves that media can exercise control over abusive government, particularly with high levels of corruption and weak legal systems. Though governments may want to curb or throttle media through censorship and intimidation, or favors and transfers; even those who wish to have access to information.

However, the Sudanese government claims that after passing by its parliament the Law of freedom of

information in January 2015, there would be an increase in transparency and people will have better access to public information. But looking at the past record of censorship and harassment by Sudanese authorities, journalist and media personnel doubt the truth of this statement and feel that such a law will be another way to suppress their freedom [52]. The right to access of information is closely connected to knowledge production. Due to open markets and international competitiveness, it has become imperative to invest in innovation and knowledge production – which will allow free flow of knowledge and unhindered access to information [53].

The right to Information has multifarious meanings: a few call it ‘freedom of information’, or sometimes ‘access to information’ or even ‘the right to know’. Each of these terms has the same meaning – and each term entails significantly that citizens must enjoy the right to know and receive government held information. The United Nations declared Freedom of Information as a fundamental human right in 1948 and since then the law allows people of a nation to seek information from the government officials who are legally bound to provide it.

3. Methodology

This study addresses the issue of corruption in Sudan within the context of Sudanese press by investigating how the Sudanese press frames the coverage of issues of corruption in Sudan. This study therefore proposes a content analysis of Sudanese newspaper on their coverage of the issues of corruption. An empirical study into this issue will help researchers to explore how far the press or media in Sudan are capable of addressing anti-corruption issues in the country. Though Sudan has a large number of local and national newspapers, still not enough attention has been paid to issues of corruption. The main cause of this ineffectiveness is that all sources of information that the media depend upon are often under the control of the ruling elite [11]. Access to government information is limited and this hinders the press as the fourth estate in performing their watch dog functions over the government [3]. Journalists who are empowered to expose government misdeeds have been under intense pressure with closure of press houses and increased detention of reporters by security forces (The Guardian, 30, June 2015). Therefore, a content analysis on the editorials of newspapers in Sudan is proposed.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Arguably, the effectiveness of media depends on their access to information, their freedom of expression, professionalism and ethical conduct of the investigative journalists. Freedom of press contributes to improved accountability, good governance and desired economic development [3]. Private/public media ownership as well as concerns about media regulation and protection of journalists who investigate corruption issues determine the operations and effectiveness of the media in relation to their coverage of such issues [54]. Such concerns have often been viewed in relation to media bias in the carrying out their duties [51]. In cases where media get the largest number of advertisements from the government agencies, it becomes difficult for investigative journalism to prove government accountability and that might lead to a decrease in corruption [55]. In other words, there is a possibility of media bias in exposing corruption in the government agencies where the governmental influence supersedes journalistic ethics, code of conduct or freedom of press. For instance, Reference [5] cites examples of political coverage of electorates influenced by the proprietors of the media houses, thus ultimately affecting the decisions. On the contrary, if the media are independent, and carry out their

duties without any bias, they are capable of drawing attention to behavior of politicians and officials seen as corrupt [56, 57]. This can serve as a means of pressurizing the governing bodies to discharge their duties in public interest thereby helping to check corruption. Reference [57] very optimistically emphasizes that media coverage can easily turn people hostile towards corrupt politicians leading to such consequences in the form of an electoral defeat of a single politician or even crumbling the whole government. Such media coverage can also force people to put pressure on the government to bring reforms in laws and regulations that are potential causes for corrupt behavior. Nogarara suggests that media could publish such stories that not only assess the burning issues but also uncover corruption and other flaws and weaknesses in public institutions like courts, police and anti-corruption agencies and develop public pressure for reforms. Conclusively, the adverse effects of government ownership and curtailment of freedom of expression can be seen more prominently on newspapers than television houses. Such conditions thus lead to inference that government ownership of the media can reduce its effectiveness and increase corruption. In addition, media contents are shaped and molded to satisfy economic needs. A news item even of corruption may often be designed less to inform and more to sell. Truly speaking, descriptions and narratives about people's plight and violence sell faster [11]. All these facts indicate that whether it is control of media through ownership or due to financial pressures obliging media clients' advertisements, there is always a deep impact on media activities and media coverage of burning issues like corruption. In other words, for Sudanese media to be more accountable and accept the responsibility of becoming a free and fearless media, they must be ready to work hard in order to build their image to the public which is possible only if they demonstrate their freedom to information, objectivity and professionalism. In addition, owners of the media must ensure timely payment of journalists' wages in order to motivate them to write more independently and fearlessly on the corrupt practices in the society.

5. Recommendations

Based on the review presented in this study, the mass media in Sudan are currently under the control of the government albeit the fact that, the government owned most of the newspapers, both the private and public newspapers in Sudan are not free to report government corruption issues. Therefore, the owners of private newspapers should expand their investments in the investigative journalism. In addition, to further develop investigative journalism in Sudan, investigative journalists need more training and academic study to ensure the performance of their role optimally.

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