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## **Social Media as Valuable Anti-Corruption Assets in the Public Sphere in Nigeria**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors BB, LG and UFY designed the study, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors OEO, SOO and AAO managed the literature searches, proof read and co-typed the article. Authors TOA and GOO managed and arranged the references. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The issue of corruption in Nigeria has assumed a monumental dimension in such a way that it has become a household song and practice. Thus, adopting a rhetoric definition may not be appropriate instead a succinct description will suffice. The dimension of corruption is monumental because it started from pre-independence in the First republic with the first major political figure found culpable and investigated in 1944 and reach its peak recently with the evolution of 'godfatherism' in the political landscape of the country. Therefore, corruption in Nigeria is more or less a household name. Using Social Responsibility Media Theory as a guide, this paper undertakes an examination of the right of the media to inform the public, serve the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible, and to protect the rights of the

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individual by acting as watchdog over the governments. This discourse analysis is backed up with the presentation of documented materials on tracking corruption through the use of social media. Since the use of mainstream media only is disadvantageous owing to its demand-driven nature, social media stands as a veritable and result-orientated asset in tracking corruption across the public sphere. This paper found that complimented with mainstream media, social media and civic journalism have exposed corrupt tendencies of contractors and public office holders including the political class in the provision and handling of infrastructural development projects thereby make public officials accountable and create an open access to good governance.

**Keywords:** *Social media; public sphere; technology; anti-corruption; mass media.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political corruption is a persistent phenomenon in Nigeria. In 2012, Nigeria was estimated to have lost over \$400 billion to corruption since independence [1,2]. In 2018, the country ranked 144th in the 180 countries listed [3] in Transparency International's Corruption Index (with Somalia, at 180th, being the most corrupt, and Denmark the least [4, 5, 6]. The rise of public administration and the discovery of oil and natural gas are two major events believed to have led to the sustained increase in the incidence of corrupt practices in the country. The Storey Report [7]. Greed, ostentatious lifestyle, customs, and people's attitudes are believed to have led to corruption. Another root cause is tribalism [8]. Friends and kinsmen seeking favor from officials can impose strains on the ethical disposition of the official as these kinsmen see government officials as holding avenues for their personal survival and gain [9]. Efforts have been made by the government to minimize corruption through the enactment of laws and the enforcement of integrity systems but with little success. [10]. Corruption constitutes a form of structural violence in Nigeria like in any society where it is allowed to fester and deprive people of basic necessities of life. Innocent citizens suffer psychological abuse when they see a privileged few live in opulence while they suffer many financial, social, and infrastructural hardships. This assertion is in line with Galtung [11] postulation, which sees structural violence as any case in which people can be barred not only by the actions of an identifiable person but by social practices that are factored into the social structure. Galtung also asserted that violence occurs "when actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realization" [11]. Corruption is a form of violence unleashed on the people because funds meant to provide basic services such as electricity, good roads, pipe borne water, proper sanitation, and good hospitals and schools, all of which are necessary

infrastructures for people to realize their potential, disappear into private pockets. People encounter a lot of suffering arising from deprivation of the basic necessities of life. They groan in silence until the situation becomes unbearable and they revolt. This is a stage of anomie where psychological violence is met with physical violence. The role of the media in promoting integrity has recently gained force, especially in response to the social disenchantment regarding governments' commitment to eradicate corruption. As Ibelema [12] observes in a number of emerging democracies in Africa, there is a deep-rooted civic cynicism with regards to the political process and the credibility of actors in the state, civil society and the media alike. Such civic cynicism promotes a normalisation of corruption in people's daily experience and thus stands as a major hindrance in attempts to counter corruption. Considering the importance of challenging such widespread attitudes of civic passivity and disenchantment in the face of corruption, approaches to promote integrity through campaigns involving the media can play an important role. By creating a national discourse in positive terms about the value of integrity, transparency and accountability, such campaigns can both educate about the effects of corruption and show that there is a viable alternative.

Efforts to promote integrity are present among different media genres, but appear to be particularly effective when they involve popular media such as television channels reaching large audiences [13]. The integrity idol campaign, for example, has had a significant impact in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria. The approach is that candidates are nominated by the public, and citizens can vote via their mobile phones in a safe and anonymous way, which helps to increase participation while empowering civil society to counter corruption [14]. The role of the media in engaging citizens in anti-corruption

efforts has been favoured by new technologies and digitalisation. Various forms of participatory and civic journalism have emerged as a result of technical innovation, the rapid growth of the internet, networked journalism and the proliferation of skills with digital technology, which partly dissolve the separation between media consumer and producer [15]. Tackling corruption is notoriously difficult. Once it's embedded in a country's systems it is difficult to weed out. But a fresh approach is being pursued in Nigeria – with some startling results. Ordinary citizens are mobilising the use of technology and social media to produce evidence that's used to hold officials to account. Over the years government has spent billions of dollars to provide social infrastructure such as road, electricity, hospital, housing provision is a problem too, and school rehabilitation and purchase of new equipment in many tertiary institutions but the same government is accused of having not done enough to make life worth living for its citizenry. The scenario portends a situation in which funds to improve infrastructure always seem to end up missing or misallocated. Researchers often report that infrastructure spending is regularly used by public officers and government officials across the continent to misappropriate funds. This study chronicles how social media, using a combination of grassroots and online activities, tracks whether government funds officially allocated to these infrastructural development projects do reach their targets.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts the review of past works. That is it used secondary source as a means of achieving, strengthen and enriching the objective of the study. According to Keyton [16] secondary data entails reviewing information or empirical data of past conducted researches similar or relating to the present research. This research basically derived data from online journals, interviews, newsletters, reports from Transparency International on Nigeria Corruption Index, the use of Camera feed and Follow Money to contextualize the value of social media as anti-corruption tools. Social Media has provided a platform for citizens-government interface in the public sphere; it has given voice to voiceless such as the youth and women. Arising from this level of engagement with government institution, this study assessed how social media has affected the responsiveness of government to the demand for social accountability

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Revolutionary Power of Social Media and the Concept of Public Sphere

Social media are basically digital technologies facilitating communication of user generated content through constant interaction [17]. In a nut shell, social media are web-based tools of electronic communication that allows users to interact, create, share, retrieve, and exchange information and ideas in any form (text, pictures, video, etc.) that can be discussed upon, archived, and used by anyone in virtual communities and networks. Social media is more about sociology and psychology of communication than about technology [18]. Major characteristics of social media that distinguishes this form of online communication from others are participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness [16]. Social media is the most recent form of digital communication and on a global scale. The power of social media has expanded beyond revolutionizing personal communication to a socio-political level bringing social revolutions and toppling governments. Arab spring in 2009 – 2010 in Middle East and few African countries which made headlines for Twitter uprisings and Facebook revolutions have made political history with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google Docs helping people. Through connectivity, more people are able to participate and awareness is raised. It also gives a voice to those who do not have one while ensuring that those who participate are socially empowered to organize themselves and form alliances on a transnational level using the tool of the social media to bring about social change [19].

The activities of the Bring Back Our Girls [#BBOG] an activist group in Nigeria that raised awareness which resonated across the world, including the UN and the White House following the kidnap of over 300 school girls by the terrorist group Boko Haram couldn't have been disseminated so wide and far without the social media. The Internet is also seen to be more than a tool for mobilization by providing diversity and horizontality. According to Omidyar [17] social media provides for self expression and promotes mutual understanding. It enables the rapid formation of networks and demonstrates our common humanity across cultural differences. It connects people, their ideas and values, like never before". The import of the above however is that social media provide an ambient of

convergence of ideas in virtual community sometimes called public sphere. The public sphere refers to a medium or channel possible for people to come together in order to discuss, analyze and deliberate on issues beyond geographical boundaries as is now obtainable through Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, blog.

The public sphere can be defined as a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and where possible to reach a common judgment about them [20]. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction is conceptually distinct from the state. It is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can be critical of the state." [21]. The basic ideal belief is that the government laws and policies should be steered by the public and that the only legitimate government is those that listen to the public sphere [22]. This is accentuated in the social responsibility media theory as second role of the media. However, the conditions which favour the existence has been eroded by the power of government in the control of operation traditional media thereby strengthens the new media to carry out this civic responsibility of the media. For instance Habermas [20] describes the public sphere as a society engaged in critical public debate and for the condition of a public sphere to exist, there must be the formation of public opinion, all citizens have access, conference in unrestricted fashion and debatable over the general governing relations. Further work on the concept of public sphere in communication discourse have been carried out by German sociologists Jurgen Gerhards and Friedhelm Neidhart who have developed an empirical model of public communication that distinguishes three levels of the public sphere (encounters in everyday life, public meetings and protests and political communication in the mass media) and specifies the input, through a put and output functions of the political sphere [23]. Unfortunately as a result of vertical and unidirectional flow information in the traditional media, and the heightened commercialization of the media market led to the neglect of democratic communities' roles between the public itself and the leaders" [24].

Traditional media of radio, television and newspapers have often been constrained in their accountability responsibility due to constraints of economic marketing and regulatory pressures. This is the case in Africa where the limited size of the domestic economy and the absence of

critical advertising infrastructure, like independently audited circulation figures, independently determine the audience ratings. Waisbord [25] in a case study of Latin America suggests that a strong co-dependence exists between the state, market and the press. This often results in severe challenges to the ability of the news media to be watchdogs, agenda setters and gatekeepers. [16] who contends that the new media provides a means to provide political information that gives room for the establishment of unlimited access to different voices and feedback between leaders and followers. It also provides a new forum for the development of interest groups as well as the formation of public opinion while allowing for dialogue between policy makers and active citizens to take place. But more than this, it provides an arena where public discourse and public opinion can take place. This has brought about a new public discourse without a tangible location but people converge in order to deliberate about national issues and make their opinions. The formation of virtual communities that come together for discourse over important national issues makes the social media the new public sphere (Moyo, 2011].

The new public sphere of the social media provides a space for the marginalized to speak such as minorities and women who were excluded in the old public sphere. Under the traditional media, women could not express themselves. Their voices were suppressed as traditionally, women were not expected to engage in the political discourse. In Egypt, women were in the forefront during protests in Cairo and elsewhere in Arab countries [17]. For instance, Asma Mahfouz, an online female political activist is credited with launching a video call that sparked the revolution against the autocratic military rule of US backed President Hosni Mubarak. So much has been written and documented about the Arab Spring. The new social media has also given birth to the concept of Citizen Journalism which is defined simply as a citizen who uses mass audience reaching tools such as the Internet and mobile phone technology to spread information and receive feedback thus creating a platform for deliberations of sorts. Citizen is emphasized because participants partaking in the information dissemination are deemed to have a stake in what becomes of that society. The benefits of public sphere was discussed under the role of social media in the public sphere [26].

## 4. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study is underpinned on the theory of social responsibility media theory which states that the media can be used by anyone who has an idea to express but they are forbidden to invade private rights or disrupt social structures. It emphasizes the freedom of the press and places responsibility on the media practitioners to abide by certain social standards. It opposes media regulation but believes that the press is automatically controlled by community opinion, consumer protest and professional ethics. According to Omidyar [17], the Social Responsibility Theory basic principles, summary include that media should: i. make information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible, ii. inform the public to enable it to take self-determined action and iii. to protect the rights of the individuals by acting as watchdog over the government. The essence of these three pivotal point of this discourse is to make government accountable to its citizenry through the process openness in its discharge of her social responsibility thus encouraging people's trust and confidence in the operation of the government. To achieve this, the theory call on government of the day to allow citizen participation in governance through the freedom of the press; and the media should be prepared to regularly make information available for citizen to advice the government based on their perception of the information available to them. This is participatory approach in government as opposed to top-down which is demeaning and repressive and counterproductive in nature. It is in this participatory nature of government that civic, citizen journalism and use of social media in the public sphere finds its place as an avenue that satisfies the requirements of the media as enshrined in social responsibility media theory.

### 4.1 General Effects of the Media on Corruption

This section addresses the first principle of social responsibility media theory that is, make information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible, the impact of the media on anti-corruption can be long-term and short-term. There is a broad consensus among researchers and practitioners alike about the long-term effects of the media on anti-corruption in relation to societal changes such as increased public awareness and citizens' capacity of critical judgment, grown political

participation, strengthened civic values and the shaping of public hostility towards corrupt behaviour [13,27]. In the short-term, in some cases, critical media coverage of corruption cases have yielded immediate effects in countering corruption. A number of cases show that investigative reporting has led to governmental or criminal investigations [28], resignations of public officials and managers [29]. This suggests that this type of direct impact on anti-corruption has been more pronounced as a result of investigative journalism than of mainstream media and alternative, internet-based media [18]. Moreover, the role of the media in engaging citizens in anti-corruption efforts has been favoured by new technologies and digitalisation. Various forms of participatory and civic journalism have emerged as a result of technical innovation, the rapid growth of the internet, networked journalism and the proliferation of skills with digital technology, which partly dissolve the separation between media consumer and producer [18]. This might suggest a general "watchdog culture" in the making, which can strengthen traditional investigative media (see, for example, Mi Panamá Transparente) and leads traditional media to increasingly adopt more participatory formats [30]. Increasing numbers of citizens across the globe resume and complement the media's work by setting alternative agendas, providing information and witness accounts from local perspectives, giving voice to marginalised groups and documenting transgressions by governments, businesses, and the traditional media [30,31]. These emerging forms of alternative and citizen-based media are drastically changing the media landscape, patterns of distribution as well as the speed of circulation and global reach of information [13].

### 4.2 Combined Effort of Mainstream Media and Alternative Media in Amplifying and Making Accessible Critical Reporting for Public Reaction

This stresses the second point in the theory which emphasize that the media should inform the public to enable it to take self-determined action. Mainstream media, as contrasted with alternative media, reaches a large population, which increases its potential to shape the collective thinking. Basically, mainstream media includes large newspapers and public or private broadcasting services, even though in the last years mainstream media outlets have adopted

digital and online forms. Mainstream media can play an important role in amplifying and making accessible critical reporting on corruption cases, especially once investigative journalists have managed to push their stories over a certain threshold of public reaction. For example, in China, Jaoming's exposure of organised human trafficking by government officials gained attention through the microblogging service Weibo and was then picked up by a local state-owned newspapers. Despite attempts to intimidate Jaoming, the government had to react and forced the resignation of 12 officials involved in the case [32]. In Nigeria, two Premium Times journalists Dapo Olorunyomi and Enelyn Okakwu were arrested by the Nigerian Police following their reports of corruption allegations against the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff. The internet remained a key tool in the fight for better governance, human rights and transparency. For instance, in more than two-thirds of the countries in the study by Freedom House, internet based actions had led to some sort of tangible outcomes. From the defeat of a restrictive legislative proposal to the exposure of corruption through citizen journalism. In Nigeria for example, internet activists helped to thwart a bill that would have limited social media activity in the country. In many other countries, individuals are using messaging apps as private social networks where they can enjoy greater freedom of expression than on more established public facing social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

The social media has opened up avenues for access to government and government officials and created the avenue for possible new community driven initiatives. Moreover, it saves time and money and provides information through social media channels which is faster, easier and cheaper to access particularly by younger people who tend to use, read and operate in the social media space. The social media creates new ways of working through online collaboration across government departments and with citizens. This has led to changes in the way government operates and develops policy. The Nigerian Federal Ministry of Finance has created a website through which it posts the monthly Federal allocation to states and the Federal Capital Territory. Through the postings of what is accrued to each state, citizens are able to monitor precisely what each state derived from the federation account. It provides the platform to engage state governments and hold them accountable in

terms of how they utilize the state resources. In the move to ensure open disclosure of information, the Nigerian Vice President on 22nd September, 2017, launched the public-private partnership Web portal. The Web portal which was built with the aid of the World Bank is to ensure public accountability and open access to good governance. All information about government and private sector partnership in the execution of and awards of contracts will be in the public domain. Although the social media provides the platform for citizens and civil societies to engage government in an unfettered access, in the open quest for transparency and accountability, governments too are also discovering the use of the social media as a means of promoting their activities in response to the challenge by citizens and civil societies. The use of the social media by governments is creating the means to improve governance. For Instance, social media is providing the means for easy publication and the rapid spread of information, thereby creating a transparent atmosphere that can strengthen citizens' goodwill towards government.

For instance, when so much rumours and falsehood were being spread about the health status of President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria his media advisers were always quick to send pictures of his meetings with government officials in London where he was undergoing medical treatment. At a particular time, the social media had it that he was dead. But several pictures of his meetings with government officials from his vacation home in London went viral in both the social media and the traditional media. These are not competitive channels. It is an additive process. According to Anita Dunn, former White House Communications Director for President Barak Obama, "If you are not communicating with social media, you are leaving a growing part of the population out of the conversation" [33]. In other words social media complements the traditional media. If you are only communicating through the social media, you leave out a significant part of the population. And if you communicate only through traditional media, you leave out a significant amount of the population [33]. That is why governments are communicating in all platforms just like the citizens; NGOs and civil societies have become dexterous in the use of social media platforms for activism.

### **4.3 The Role of Social Media in the Public Sphere (Corruption Tracking through the Use of Social Media)**

The third role which is to protect the rights of the individuals by acting as watchdog over the government is fully dissected with practical examples.

This section exemplifies the impact of the social media and civil journalism in collecting, producing and disseminating information about corruption. The public sphere refers to a medium or channel possible for people to come together in order to discuss, analyze and deliberate on issues beyond geographical boundaries as is now obtainable through Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Tumblr, etc. The public sphere can be defined as a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and where possible to reach a common judgment about them [20]. Digital networks, like web-based platforms for direct content publishing, microblogging services like Twitter or the Chinese Weibo, have significantly reduced the barriers to entry for collecting, producing and disseminating information about corruption. Indicative of the social media's potential impact on corruption are the findings of the Global Corruption Barometer, which showed that 56% of people surveyed from 107 countries felt most inclined to get active against corruption through social media [26]. This was particularly highlighted in countries like Russia, Sudan, Algeria, Papua New Guinea and Lebanon. However, Civic journalism refers to the idea of integrating journalism into the democratic process by abandoning the notion of citizens as passive spectators of the political process. Civic journalism stresses the need for the media to be part of the solution rather than a detached observer [12]. Thus, civic journalism has begun to fill the gaps and to create a mobilised readership that takes matters into their own hands [15]. However, in terms of political engagement and to promote integrity and personal responsibility civic journalism is particularly powerful compared to other media genres as it fosters direct participation [34]. In recognition of this potential, civic journalism based on social media and digital platforms is increasingly intersecting with traditional media outlets. The Huffington Post Investigative Unit, for example, fosters collaboration between citizens and professional media in the production of news [35]. Another interesting case of participative journalism is the Mi Panamá

Transparent project, which encourages citizens to directly report on crimes connected to drug trafficking, a major breeding ground for corruption.

Meanwhile in Nigeria two main approaches- "Camera feed" and "Follow the Money" were examined here in which corruption in the provision of social infrastructures such as bridge construction, hospital, water and electricity were tracked via the combined instrumentalities of social media and civic journalism. Although the process has its bottleneck, but the aim of averting noncompletion of project was achieved.

A Camera feed entails taking photographs of the extent to which the progress of the project at hand was achieved were taken and reported to the government for comparison if the present state of the work justify the amount of money released by government for the work. In Nigeria, infrastructure projects that were monitored by citizens can be compared to infrastructure projects that were not monitored. It was found that there was a positive link between citizens using technology and social media to monitor infrastructure projects resulted to better completion rates and standards for the infrastructure projects. An example is the use of Camera feed to monitor the construction of the second river Niger Bridge. When government officials and infrastructure building engineering firms knew that they were being monitored, they didn't want to get caught out. In certain cases, citizens were able to engage with the ministry of works and their state governor and use social media to engage in discussions about the project. Ultimately, the initiative afforded the citizens to be part and parcel of the project.

By taking pictures of the proposed infrastructure sites and tagging their state governors or representatives in regular posts about the infrastructure projects, civic participation was encouraged. Although there was no often response in the first instance, the high visibility generated by social media and the threat of losing forthcoming elections often resulted in the infrastructure projects being completed. Monitoring projects has been used by firms and the government as a way to provide more transparency.

For example, research from Uganda shows that corrupt government officials were less able to siphon money for their own enrichment when

citizens knew where money was supposed to go and could therefore monitor spending; the diversion of funds fell by 12% over six years.

Research from Kenya also showed that public monitoring of government projects reduced corruption by 20%.

Another initiative at tracking corrupt practices by the public servant in Nigeria is "Follow the Money". More than 10,000 people on Twitter are following the Nigerian initiative, Follow the Money. It tracks how funds allocated to aid and development projects are actually being spent and this has succeeded in mounting pressure on the government to be accountable to the citizenry. Follow the Money, however, is a project that's striking back. Using a combination of grassroots and online activities, it tracks whether government funds officially allocated to health, education and development projects do in fact reach their targets. If they do not, Follow the Money launches campaigns and demands government accountability. Oludotun Babayemi, co-founder of the project said "we focus on extensive social media activities and also bring in traditional media and hold local hearings," thus Follow the Money can exchange information with citizens across the country and learn about shortcomings. Instances of achievements of the initiative across the country are documented as follows:

For instance, when a major flood in 2012 destroyed the Gutsura community in Zamfara State, the government announced it would provide emergency relief, allocate funds and relocate the 3,000 residents. "But one year later, not even a cent had arrived," recounts Babayemi [36]. "A citizen reporter of ours in the area told us what was happening and we started informing people via Twitter, Facebook and the radio," Babayemi says. "We told the stories about the people there and demanded that the government act." A few months later the residents were relocated to another community and were given new housing.

Follow the Money is a good example of how digital innovation can expose financial irregularities. Using data journalism, social media and grassroots activism, "Follow the Money" tracks national aid payments promised by the Nigerian government to specific local communities. It is an ambitious undertaking, given the pervasiveness of state of corruption in Nigeria.

Digital tools can help create a larger public sphere, particularly in places where corruption is widespread and government activities lack transparency. Looking at the success story of Follow the Money, one could argue that the Nigerian government is heading towards more transparency and openness. Follow the Money has created a new public sphere that could make corruption increasingly difficult for the government [37].

However, in Kaduna state there is an approach via the radio programming tagged WAKAWAKA, a phone-in programme which engage listeners from all over the State to give account of how far certain projects in their communities have progressed since initiation till date. As a witness to this, this approach has really helped the people of Kaduna State to monitor, how money budgeted is released on monthly basis to each local government area, what its being spent on and what is the progress made so far on the project? Through this, public office holders are on their toes to deliver on their promises and render their stewardship as occasion demands.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Social media can be used as alternative tools to trap corruption especially in the area of infrastructural development. This can only be achieved when budget is made visible to the citizens. The essence is to enable citizens follow know and follow up the project under investigation. As a result, the public would be able to demand stewardship where government has nothing to fear. In achieving this, this study found that social media as valuable tools used to hold government accountable in its provision of infrastructural development to its citizenry in Nigeria. Therefore, this study recommends that in an attempt to enshrine the culture of transparency and openness in a corruption entangled and intertwined as represented by some societies in the African continent, social media has created a public sphere that is capable of making corruption increasingly difficult for the government especially when combined with civic journalism.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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