

Accelerating the Fight Against Corruption in Uganda: Strengthening the Coalition Between Anti-Corruption Agencies and the Media

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine how the media contributes to corruption, the need to report on corruption with intent to create awareness as a preventive measure, and how the media can partner with anti-corruption agencies to accelerate the fight against corruption in Uganda. In order to achieve these objectives, the article used documentary analysis, literature review and interviews. The argument in the article is that the media has a big role to play in the fight against corruption, beginning with acknowledging that there is manifestation of corruption practices – cash for news, staged or fake news, gifts and advertisement, nepotism and media capture. Therefore the media has to overcome corruption within its own ranks. Other means through which the media can contribute towards the fight against corruption include both tangible and intangible ways. It also emphasizes that there is urgent need for the media to participate in corruption prevention, through the launching of investigation by authorities, the scrapping of laws or policies promoting opportunities for corruption, the impeachment or forced resignation of corrupt politicians, the firing of officials, the launching of judicial proceedings; and since the fight against corruption is a collective responsibility, then the media has to partner with anti-corruption agencies to accelerate the fight against corruption in Uganda. We cannot ignore the critical role of the media in the fight against corruption, and together the various actors can curb corruption in the country through a coalition of willing anti-corruption crusaders.

Key words: Uganda, corruption, media, prevention, collective responsibility

Introduction

The media is often referred to as the fourth estate or pillar in a democracy. It plays a critical role as a watchdog, agenda setter and gatekeeper. The media frames the discussion about corruption as a public problem, suggests solutions to curbing corruption, lends voice to a wide range of perspectives and arguments, and empowers citizens to fight corruption. Varied studies have shown a strong positive correlation between freedom of the press and control of corruption (Fardigh et al., 2011; Brunetti and Weder, 2003). The media in Uganda has made a fundamental contribution towards fighting corruption too in various ways, and can still do a good job by unveiling corruption. However, it has also been observed that as far as corruption is concerned, no one is innocent and the media is not immune to corruption. So, there is need for the various actors to work together to accelerate the fight against corruption as a collective responsibility. After all, the public perception in Uganda is that corruption is heavily entrenched in society and has to be curbed (Inspectorate of Government, 2014). This article has five sections after the introduction: the first section details the research methodology used. The second section seeks to shed light on *corruption in the media and how it can be fought*. The third section seeks to answer the question – *Can the media contribute to the fight against*

corruption? If so, how? The fourth section focuses on *Steps toward forming a coalition between anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) and the media to accelerate the fight against corruption in Uganda*, and the last section is the conclusion. We are thus going to look at each section in turn.

Methods

The study is a qualitative exploratory study. It relies heavily on a number of documents including newspaper stories, reports on media work, and reports from international bodies like Transparency International, and previous studies. A total of 18 interviews were also carried out, and the participants were selected through snowball sampling; the participants include officials from anti-corruption agencies (Police, Inspectorate of Government and Auditor General), members of parliament, journalists and editors, trainers of journalists, development partners, government officials and the civil society. The data was analyzed through a number of techniques: classification, constant comparison, logical analysis, discourse analysis and narrative analysis. Care was taken to ensure that the ethical values of beneficence, justice and respect for person were upheld. This was done through allowing free participation and exit, non-disclosure of sources of information and informed consent.

Corruption in the Media

According to the Inspectorate of Government Fourth Annual Report, 2014, corruption in Uganda is widespread and is a major constraint on economic development and cause of poverty in Uganda. The public perception is that corruption is heavily entrenched in society and has to be curbed. Corruption has been variously defined, the simplest definition being *the abuse of public power for personal gain or for the benefit of a group to which one owes allegiance*. It occurs when public office is abused by an official accepting, soliciting, or extorting a bribe (Langseth, Stapenhurst & Pope, 1997).

In Uganda the media is faced with a number of factors that may foment corruption. These include lack of journalistic skills, unprofessionalism, limited funding, inadequate and undemocratic legal frameworks. As a consequence, some journalists and media houses are not immunized against corruption. Elsewhere, there are many examples of journalists, editors and media houses accepting bribes and publishing paid material disguised as news stories, or extorting money either for publishing favorable stories or for not publishing damaging ones (Ristow, 2010). Other types of corruption in the media include cash for news, staged or fake news, gifts and advertising, nepotism, and media capture.

Cash for News

The concept of “cash for news coverage” is where journalists agree to publish positive news against payments. This is done in a number of ways; 1) at the interpersonal level – where cash is handed directly to the journalist by a news source; 2) at the intra-organizational level - where the editor tells the journalist what to write or not write, due to some sort of internal pressure such as from advertising; and 3) at the inter-organizational level, where there can be fairly formal arrangements, and even a legal contract under which a company pays a news organization a monthly amount in exchange for having a certain number of articles published about that company (Ristow, 2010). In Uganda, we have labeled it the *Khaki (Brown) Envelope*

Syndrome. Two years ago, two *Daily Monitor* headlines “Journalists arrested over extortion” and “More Ugandan Journalists Arrested in alleged Extortion”, attest to this phenomenon. The hope is that it is not widespread.

Staged or fake news

It is also possible for some journalists to work it out with some news sources and end up publishing fake or staged news. This can be in form of exaggerated comments from consumers of a product, exaggerated numbers of people attending a political rally and support for a politician.

Gifts and advertisements

Giving gifts and placing advertisements as media corruption often results from the widespread collusion between journalists and public relations and advertising organizations (Spence, 2008). For example, some media organizations report on the growing trend of public relations companies using pseudo independent and objective news release to promote their clients' products. Similar to such media release, the practice of cash for comment involves presenting paid advertisement as editorial comment or opinion (Spence, 2008). In Uganda, currently, there are many PR and advertising firms which are owned by former journalists. They know the industry in and out and if not well managed, can be a vehicle for promoting corruption in the media. Lastly, there is also arm-twisting from major advertisers such as big business empires and the government.

Nepotism

Nepotism in the newsrooms may occur while hiring or firing staff or publishing a feature article. In the United Kingdom, for instance, “media is rife with nepotism. Parents secure internships and even teen columns for their student offsprings” (Corkindal, 2007). The extent to which we have nepotism in the Ugandan media is an empirical question that we need to investigate.

Media capture

All those that want to shape public opinion for private or political interests look at the media as the key to that. It is likely that low salaries make journalists more susceptible to accepting bribes, and an individual with a low salary will benefit more from a given bribe than one with a higher salary (Klitgaard, 1988). It is observed that journalists are not well paid, and are thus susceptible to capture. Moreover, most journalists have limited possibilities of advancement in the hierarchy, and this makes corruption attractive.

Fighting media corruption

Fighting corruption in the media includes raising awareness of ethical standards, strengthening media independence through adequate media policies, promoting media accountability through increased oversight and controls as well as investigative journalism training. A number of actors have a fundamental role to play; media development organizations should: a) Promote ethics training as an integral part of professional standards of journalism, with specific training

on why and how to avoid taking cash for news coverage, b) Support the creation of media accountability systems such as ombudsmen and other complaints mechanisms to increase transparency and accountability of media operations (Arnold and Sumir, 2012)

Arnold and Sumir (2012) further argue that news media owners, managers, and editors should: a) Adopt, publicize and implement a firm policy of zero tolerance for any form of cash for news coverage—from simple “facilitation” payments to reporters to paid advertisements masquerading as objective news. This can include reviewing pay policies to remove incentives for journalists to indulging in unethical practices, b) Acknowledge that pay can have an impact on ethics, c) Create accountability systems for establishing more transparent relationship with their audiences,

The Public Relations Association of Uganda should encourage their members to practice zero tolerance, declining the sometimes too-easy path of paying in the hope of getting the best spin on their clients’ stories, and helping them with strategies to do so without hurting their business. Lastly, we could encourage media oversight and accountability through the available regulatory bodies to monitor the media and ensure that ethical standards are upheld by the profession.

Given that the Media is prone to Corruption; can it contribute to the fight against Corruption?

Having observed that the media is not immune to corruption, it is imperative to note that it can play a significant role in combating corruption by exposing and reporting the facts relating to corruption particularly in high places, in the private and in the public sector, without fear or favour. So far, the media in the Caribbean has played an important role in at least one key area – exposing, editorializing and analyzing corruption in public contract awards, in abuse of corporate power, in bringing to light external influences in campaign financing and party funding across the region.

The role of the media in the fight against corruption can be seen in tangible and intangible ways. The impact of media reporting on corruption can be “tangible” and “intangible” (Stapenhurst, 2000). It is tangible when some sort of visible outcome can be attributed to a particular news story or series of stories—for instance, the launching of investigation by authorities, the scrapping of a law or policy promoting opportunities for corruption, forced resignation of a corrupt politician, the firing of an official, and the launching of judicial proceedings. It is intangible when checks on corruption arise from the broader social climate of enhanced political pluralism, enlivened public debate and a heightened sense of accountability among politicians, public bodies and institutions that are inevitably the by-product of a hard-hitting, independent news media.

Fighting corruption through investigative journalism

Investigative journalism can help as a powerful tool to fight corruption and uncover corruption in the media. For instance Makerere University with the support from GIZ has been building capacity in investigative journalism, and African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) offers an investigative reporting grant.

Investigating and exposing corrupt officials and office-holders

When corrupt officials are exposed, this may prompt ACAs to initiate formal investigations into the reported allegations of corruption. Furthermore, the media disseminates ACA findings thus reinforcing the legitimacy of ACAs and putting those who hold power and wish to implement their corrupt wishes on check.

Prompting investigations by official bodies

In Uganda, for instance, the purchase of “junk helicopters” story was first broken by the *New Vision* in 1997. This led to a judicial commission of inquiry in 1999 to investigate which recommended that several officials, including Gen. Salim Saleh and Colonel Kizza Besigye, be tried for corruption. The cabinet also directed that the implicated army officers should face an army court martial. Unfortunately, neither the commission’s report nor the findings of the court martial were ever made public, but the media did its role (Global Corruption Report, 2003).

Reinforcing the work and legitimacy of the state’s anti-corruption bodies

Journalists have a symbiotic relationship with ACAs that investigate or prosecute corrupt officials. It is at times a transactional relationship and instrumental in value, whereby journalists’ benefits are in terms of strong, dramatic stories and ACAs have their activities reported on. Additionally, the publicity may encourage witnesses to do wrong and in some cases mobilize the public pressure for corrupt officials to be held to account.

Strengthening anti-corruption bodies by exposing their flaws

One of the key assets for a journalist is the source. However, journalists may become too close to the ACAs and as such refrain from punchy, dramatic stories about them. More so, some journalists may hesitate to consider that these very sources can themselves turn out to be corrupt, or tainted by corruption. No public body—or private entity, for that matter—can be immune from corruption, after all.

Helping to shape public opinion hostile to “sleaze” in government

The Ugandan media has done a lot in reporting sleaze in government. For instance, quite often, according to the IG, in 2012, the OAG conducted a special audit into allegations of financial impropriety and irregularities involving diversion, fraud, unauthorized approvals of payments and irregular withdrawals of funds. As a consequence of these irregularities, funds to an estimated value of UGX 58 billion had been misappropriated between 2011 and 2012. In 2012, the OAG audit established that a number of financial controls had been deliberately circumvented, resulting in the misappropriation of funds to a value of approximately UGX 165 billion. All of these cases have resulted in widespread media coverage, increasing citizens’ awareness of the scale of corruption (Inspectorate of Government, 2014: 10). The ensuing uproar is widely believed to contribute to public disgust over “sleaze” in public life and may lead to attitudinal change towards corrupt behavior.

Pressure for changes to laws and regulations that create a climate favorable to corruption

Hard-hitting journalism can also expose flaws in policy, laws or regulations that foster a climate ripe for corruption, thus creating pressure for reform. For instance, the IG has pointed out the need for Government to set up the Leadership Code Tribunal to facilitate the full implementation of the Leadership Code Act 2012. Second, the passage of the Anti-Corruption Amendment Bill 2013 contains a clause to facilitate the recovery of misappropriated funds and assets. The introduction of a law that empowers anti-corruption institutions to confiscate assets and to recover misappropriated funds will act as a strong disincentive to those who may engage in corrupt practices. Additionally, Government should set up the Leadership Code Tribunal to facilitate the full implementation of the Leadership Code Act 2012, and also government should consider the benefits of implementing the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). The media should thus champion the campaign to popularize these recommendations from the IG.

Anticipation of adverse media publicity prompting a preemptive response

Journalists nosing for news and prodding even in the absence of evidence may lead to the generation of stories from the affected. Journalists should be vigorous in chasing stories and prompting sources to come up with responses. They can as well work with the ACAs to get out stories that are still cooking, and also represent well the sources.

Steps toward forming a coalition between Anti-Corruption Agencies (ACAs) and the Media to accelerate the Fight against Corruption in Uganda

Largely drawing from Byrne, Arnold, and Nagano (2010) and Arnold and Sumir (2012), I propose the following.

First, there is need to specify the issue: It is necessary for the ACAs, through a number of avenues, to clearly define their objectives in the fight against corruption to achieve an effective media campaign. The issue determines which media are most relevant: petty corruption is likely to be an issue of the local media, while grand corruption might more successfully targeted through the elite media. Social media complement all media campaigns.

Second, Map relationships and stakeholders: Each media house has some well-known journalists whose passion or assignment is to cover corruption. The ACAs need to familiarize themselves with editors that have a reputation to reveal corruption in their news outlets. While profiling the media to rely on, such variables may be useful; the place of the media practitioners in the national power hierarchy, dedicated, knowledgeable, and eager to reveal corruption and has some public clout.

Third, Form the coalition: Identifying media partners is one thing, and winning them over to join the coalition is another. Media partners have to be convinced that it is in their interest to cover and criticize corruption. The ACAs need to conduct background conversations, host media breakfasts, and come up with joint CSR projects as instruments to inform journalists about the ongoing anti-corruption efforts and also as a way to forge relationships of mutual benefit.

Fourth, Sustain the coalition: Anti-corruption coalitions with the media should not be limited to an issue or event. It should be continuous through, for instance, regular meetings, ACAs becoming reliable sources of stories and co-hosted events.

However, when forming a partnership with the media, some constraints of the media industry should be understood. Media partners may be given a story, and they do not cover it. The story may be covered, but it may not have a big audience or make a big change. The media industry operates under a number of constraints, including, freedom of the press, protection of journalists, and access to information, journalism culture, journalism capacity, competition and capture, Motivation, short media cycle, and tight deadlines.

With regard to freedom of the press, according to the UHRC report 2013, in that year there was a closure of four media houses, in the wake of the controversial letter reportedly authored by the former coordinator of intelligence services. With regard to the protection of journalists, in the same year Human Rights Network for Journalists – Uganda documented 110 attacks on journalists, doubling those of 2010. Two radio journalists, BasajaMivule and Simon KaggwaNjagala were suspended from their shows on Radio 1 and Akaboozi respectively; Thomas Pere and Alex Kule died mysteriously; and media practitioners have been under pressure from various state agents and other elements to reveal their sources. Such also affects the access to information, regardless of the legal framework. Indeed, the UHRC found out that there were still gaps in the access to information, which is the duty of the state to guarantee.

Journalism culture also varies and may affect the way particular journalists behave and report corruption. It has been observed that some journalists consider themselves as mouthpieces for the government or particular entities. This calls for intense engagement with journalism associations and journalism schools to let journalists appreciate that they are pillars of democracy.

Journalism capacity is sometimes overestimated. It is true that some the ability to conceptualize corruption and utilize investigative techniques significantly is not universal. Other than investigative journalism techniques (ACME, Journalism Schools etc.), it is helpful to have workshops and seminars that improve on sector knowledge, public policy and anti-corruption strategies (like at UMI) to help some journalists distinguish between petty corruption, grand corruption, political corruption, collusion and extortion, and inefficiency. Additionally, avenues like annual conferences and media conventions should be exploited; to explicitly focus on the theme of corruption. Media partners can be enabled to conduct their trade in an ethical manner that respects privacy and avoids litigation.

Competition and media capture: Media partners may hesitate to cover corruption if it involves important and powerful political figures or companies that are their advertising clients, and in the Ugandan case, government Ministries, Departments and Agencies MDAs which are the biggest advertisers. As much as a breaking story sells, it also matters on who is reported on. Some business empires have penetrated some of the news rooms so much that mention of a story concerning them either invokes fear or reprimand from the gatekeepers- editors and sub editors.

Motivation: Media partners who do their job well should be motivated for successful anti-corruption investigative journalism. This can be done through awards that are organized and funded, inter alia, by the ACAs, civil society organizations, universities, private corporations, and MDAs. These awards must be designed in a way that they are publicly acclaimed, since the country is now awash with award-giving bodies with suspect intentions—and possibly corrupt.

Short media cycle: The ACAs' level of tolerance should be also lifted higher, to know that the pressure of storytelling may be responsible for shallow analysis, short sound bites that are reported out of context, and a disregard for complexities. This is not to promote unprofessional behaviour, but to invite ACAs to appreciate media constraints and design ways on how to manage them. This is closely related to the issue of tight deadlines whereby journalists have to finish their stories in the early evenings for them to be included in next day's paper or a story to be included in the evening television news must be filmed and edited in the afternoon. Radio is the fastest and a radio journalist wishes to be the first to make the world know. ACAs therefore must know when to time their information releases and be accessible to reporters when needed. It is imperative to focus on stories that can sell, which calls for better framing of stories.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that the media can cover up or uncover corruption. However, it has a twin role in contributing to the accelerated fight against corruption in Uganda. First, by being alert to any corrupt elements within its own ranks, and second by exposing corruption through extortion—when government officials refuse or delay a service to extract a rent, and collusive corruption—where client and bureaucrat have a mutual interest in the corrupt act as in instances of tax evasion (Brunetti and Weder, 2003). For corruption through extortion, the press provides a platform for voicing complaints. The incentives of exposing collusive corruption lie in opportunities of investigative journalists and media institutions to achieve fame and larger audiences, as profit-making media firms seek to expose corruption to sell their product (Suphachalasai, 2005: 3–4). The Ugandan media, together with the ACAs can play a significant role in accelerating the fight against corruption while, at the same time, achieving its reason for existence.

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