

Interrogating Leadership: An Assessment of Selected Newspaper Editorials in Holding the Buhari Administration Accountable

¹Akanni, Tunde, PhD & ²Fatonji, Stephen, PhD

Abstract

The Buhari administration came to power with repeated promises to focus on insecurity, corruption and economy. This study therefore investigated how a regular newspaper, The Punch and an online newspaper, Premium Times, consciously made efforts to hold the said administration accountable. Adopting the development media theory, this scholarly intervention therefore resorted to examining editorials from the selected newspapers as vital contents to investigate the extent to which the said newspapers attempted to hold the federal government accountable in the eight years of President Buhari's administration. Deploying the research method of both qualitative and quantitative content analyses, it was found that editorials focusing on economic issues were preponderant in the two publications. Most of the editorials, 64% of them, published by the two newspapers during the said period focused on the three major promises between 2020 and 2022, being the second term of the Buhari administration. Premium Times had more editorials (52%) on security, economy and corruption than The Punch newspaper (48%). The study also revealed that majority of the editorials on the three major promises followed constructive criticism and investigative approach (76%) while about a quarter of the editorials followed commendation and opinion-based approach (24%).

Keywords: leadership, Buhari administration, Media Accountability, newspapers, editorials.

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- 1 Tunde Akanni is an Associate Professor of Journalism at Lagos State University, Ojo (LASU)
 - 2 while Stephen Fatonji is a lecturer at the LASU Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, and Convener, New Era Nigeria.

Introduction

One of the roles of the mass media in a democratic society is to hold the government accountable. This is why the media are often described as the watchdog of a nation, a term allegorically used to imply the need for the media to constantly and effectively monitor, evaluate, investigate and report every aspect of the society. The media are expected to serve as platforms for informing and educating people on problems affecting the environment in which they operate (McQuail, 2010). Oso (2012, p.27) affirms that “the mass media...should act as the public watchdog overseeing the activities of the government and its institutions”. The onus therefore rests on the media to ensure that the society within which they operate are monitored and reported in such a way that will promote peace and development of the society. Some of the challenges confronting Nigeria (and many developing nations) include hunger, abject poverty, insecurity, poor healthcare, communal conflicts, weak economy, huge infrastructural deficit, collapsing educational system, among others.

Insecurity, weak economy and corruption are long time challenges in Nigeria. The problems intensify with the arrival of each successive administration, whether military or civilian. However, the challenges became aggravated towards the end of the Goodluck-Jonathan administration. Thus, the former opposition party, the All Progressives Congress took advantage of the problems and decided to focus their campaign on insecurity, economy and corruption in 2015. At the time, Nigeria, especially, the North East was at the mercy of terrorists while the economy was fast collapsing and corruption was a household name. Taking advantage of the situation, the former military head of state, Buhari and the then opposition All Progressives Congress mounted an aggressive media campaign to deliver Nigeria from the mess and enthrone an ideal government. Like a magic ounce, the opposition party defeated the ruling People’s Democratic Party who had been in power for 16 years. That became the first time an opposition party would defeat a ruling party in the history of Africa’s largest democracy, Nigeria. Ironically,

seven years into the administration, the three promises remain a mirage, with worsening insecurity, economy and growing corruption. This study therefore investigates the efforts of the media to hold the Buhari administration accountable and responsible for the promises made during the electioneering campaigns.

The media served as the triumphant horses on which the Buhari APC rode to gain power both in the first and second tenures. The study therefore interrogated the media visibility of the three promises made and how the media carried out its constitutional mandate of holding the government accountable. To achieve that, the researchers carried content analysis of the editorials of major newspaper publications in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on development media theory. Propounded in 1987 by Dennis McQuail, the theory assumes that the media should be used for economic, social, cultural and political development. The theory therefore, seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the press in countries that are classified as developing countries (McQuail, 2010). According to McQuail, (2010), the media in developing countries should pay attention to developmental challenges such as absence of communication infrastructure, professional skills, production and cultural resources, dependence on the developed nations for technological needs, skills and cultural products; the economy and other issues. According to McQuail (2010), the media under development press theory must participate in development tasks as designed by the state. Thus, the development plan of the Buhari administration was expected to be given adequate attention by the media.

Methodology

The research design adopted a descriptive approach that enables clear presentation of the issues focused on for clear understanding. The population of this study comprises all the newspapers published in Nigeria. The Nigerian Press Council lists 28 newspapers as national

newspapers in the country as of June, 2022 when this information was retrieved (<http://new.presscouncil.gov.ng>). However, *The Punch* and *Premium Times* newspapers were selected based on online availability and national coverage. This study employed the use of content analysis research method. Editorials on governance issues bothering on security, economy and corruption in selected newspapers constituting the data were carefully examined, coded and analyzed. Estimating inter-coder reliability with Cohen's Kappa statistics on SPSS, the result was approximately 0.83. According to Fleiss Guidelines for Kappa interpretation, 0.75 and above is rated excellent; 0.4-0.75 fair or good, while less than 0.4 is considered poor. Relying therefore on this interpretation guideline, the inter-coder reliability for the study was adjudged excellent. Data were presented using descriptive statistics comprising frequency tables.

Roles of Mass Media in the Society

The main functions of communication in society, according to Lasswell (1948) include surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of the society in responding to its environment, and the transmission of the cultural heritage. Wright (1960) as cited by McQuail, (2010) added entertainment as a fourth key media function. This may be part of the transmitted culture but it has another aspect - that of providing individual reward, relaxation and reduction of tension, which makes it easier for people to cope with real-life problems and for societies to avoid breakdown. With the addition of a fifth item, mobilization - designed to reflect the widespread application of mass communication to political and commercial propaganda, McQuail (2010) explains that the mass media should provide information about events and conditions in society and the world. They should also explain, interpret and comment on the meaning of events and information. This includes providing support for established authority and norms, socializing and uniting the diverse groups and ensuring consensus building. To ensure continuity, McQuail (2010) says the media should regularly express the society's traditions, customs and culture and its norms and recognize subcultures and new cultural

developments. This includes forging and maintaining commonality of values.

In addition, McQuail (2010) says the media are expected to entertainment in form of amusement, diversion, relaxation and reduction of social tension. Lastly, McQuail (2010) advocates that mass media should constantly campaign for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, work and sometimes morality and ethical values. Similarly, Akepe and Oyedokun (2014) classify media roles into traditional and developmental roles. The traditional roles include information dissemination, educating the general public, serving as watchdog of the society and provision of entertainment as well as promotion of culture. The developmental roles include the need to set agenda by determining what people read, shaping of public opinion by influencing the thinking and mindset of people and influencing public policy by setting the agenda.

It should however be noted that the classification of media roles is not mutually exclusive. The traditional roles may overlap into the developmental roles. For instance, as the media play the watchdog role by holding the government accountable, they are indirectly contributing to the development of the nation as funds are put to judicious use and resources are distributed across all strata of the society. According to Kayode (2017), whatever the roles generally ascribed to the media it is acknowledged that the media play a very important role in the promotion of good governance and in minimizing corruption. It raises awareness of the key issues and explain how they can be addressed. It also scrutinizes the efforts of the government towards addressing the challenges. The media can play its role in addressing the issues of corruption, economy and insecurity at every stage of the functions identified above. At the surveillance or information stage, the media can monitor the problems and report them as they are without embellishment. At the correlation stage, the media is expected to engage in robust interpretation of the problems without taking sides. Balanced and fair analysis of issues will enlighten the public, educate them on the real issues and enable them to make informed decisions on governance. At the continuity or cultural

stage, the media can promote cultures related to honesty, selflessness and community life as opposed to individualism. This can be achieved through effective cultural programming. The media can also educate the people on the key issues through its entertainment programmes. This is known as edutainment, a concept associated with behaviour change communication.

The extent of media freedom and democracy determines the extent of accountability and transparency in a country. If the media are given the requisite freedom to perform their roles, corruption will be exposed, accountability will be promoted and there will be less corruption. Ahrend (2002) supports that press freedom is associated with lower levels of corruption. Unfortunately, genuine free press is rare to find anywhere in the world. Even the most liberal media systems are not entirely free as owners still parley with powerful business magnates and the political class, thereby rubbing off negatively on the degree of their neutrality in framing issues. According to Pasek (2006, p.3), “literature suggests that as countries become more democratic, mass media come to assume a critical role and as media become freer, their role increases”. Yet, there is less clarity on how this interaction occurs due to lack of consistent model that predicts the relationship between media liberalization and democratization (Pasek 2006, p.4).

Camaj (2013) asserts that the growing literature on the role of mass media for governmental accountability suggests that a free press is among the most effective mechanism of external controls on bureaucratic corruption and promotion of good governance. The media have the potential to curb corruption and to provide a platform for voicing complaints. Suphachalasai (2005, p. 3–4) argues that the incentives of exposing corruption lie in opportunities of investigative journalists and media institutions to achieve fame and larger audiences, which help to increase patronage. Besley and Burgess (2002) corroborate that governments are more responsive in climes favourably disposed to unhindered public access to information, especially information that are in public interest and such that do not undermine the security and

sovereignty of the nation. According to Camaj (2013), studies that examine the attributes of the media system as an influencing variable between mass media and corruption suggest that media ownership, distribution, and competition have important consequences for the reportage of corruption and enactment of policies that promote transparency and accountability.

Diamond et al. (1999) note that often time, accountability scholars assume that competitive, free and fair elections are the main process through which the accountability is guaranteed. However, Dubnick (2002, p. 10) says accountability has also come to feature various institutional checks and balances by which democracies seek to control the actions of governments. Hence, Schedler (1999) argues that governmental accountability encompasses a combination of vertical and horizontal institutions. Vertical accountability describes a relationship between unequals, and it “refers to some powerful superior actors holding some less powerful inferior actors accountable or vice versa” (Schedler 1999, p. 23). In this category, according to Schedler (1999), fall electoral accountability, civil society, and mass media. Horizontal accountability implies the power checks and balances exercised by equals (O’Donnell 1999). Here, it is referred to the interstate relations between the executive, legislative, and judiciary (Camaj, 2013). While the vertical-horizontal accountability thesis is plausible, it should be noted that mass media in most African countries are nowhere close to being described as ‘superior’ to political office holders and business elites. In Nigeria for instance, some newspapers are owned by politicians who maintain allegiance to the political class. Some major private television stations are also owned by politicians and business executives who have close links to corridors of power. To hold the political class accountable in such system of media ownership is an empty dream. Camaj (2013) says electoral accountability approach considers voter participation as an influential factor on checking corruption. Camaj (2013) explains that voters can discipline the government by using their ability to replace the incumbent by electing a new government. However, given that voters’ power is limited by their inability to monitor

governmental action directly, they rely on mass media to perform this task (Camaj, 2013). Mass media contribute to voter learning in a pre-electoral process (Weaver and Drew 2001) and they may influence the outcome of the elections by influencing the weight voters put on different issues in their voting choice.

Furthermore, civil society represents another channel through which accountability is exercised. Civil society actors indirectly influence governmental accountability by “strengthening the institutions of vertical accountability that underpin them, such as electoral democracy and an independent media” (Fox 2000, p. 1). In Nigeria for instance, civil society organizations like the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), Human Development Initiative (HDI), Budget, MacArthur Foundation and Human and Environmental Development Agency (HEDA) play major roles in checkmating corruption through advocacy, citizen education, research, media partnership and constructive criticism of corrupt practices and systems. As Stapenhurst (2000) claims, “Civil-society organizations often work hand-in-hand with news reporters, who broadcast and reinforce these groups’ demands, sharpen their lines of inquiry and disseminate their findings to a broader public” (p. 9). Empirical studies suggest that media liberalization fosters democracy only when coupled with emerging civic society (Hall and O’Neil, 1998). The relationship between media professionals and policymakers is a symbiotic one because mass media depend on sources of information (Camaj, 2013), while policymakers rely on the media to publicize their goals (Berkowitz, 1992). Yet, research suggests that the media have power to set policy agendas in general (Dearing and Rogers 1996, p. 73) and the agenda of the legislative in particular. Policymakers and legislators tend to use media reports as a measure of public opinion when prioritizing their policies.

Power of Newspaper Editorials

Editorials are media voices. They act as the position of media owners on the issues being examined. Through editorials, newspapers can commend,

condemn, crystalize or criticize the government, its policies, actions and inactions. Editorials are not just opinions; they are highly informed opinions. They should not just be the voices of the newspapers but also the voices of majority of the citizens. An editorial should ideally reveal the hypocrisy of the ruling class, their weaknesses, mis-governance, wrong decisions, and implications of their actions/inactions on the citizens. It should tell the truth to power without mincing words, call the government to order when it is going wrong and wake them up to their responsibilities in case they are sleeping. Editorials should not just condemn; they should also commend where necessary. They should be used to address current issues in the society. They are not just about the government; they can also be used to address citizens, policy makers, professional bodies, government of other nations and any other issue worth public attention. Editorials, like news, should be sacred, free from sentiments and other colorations. Editorials should make the parties addressed feel sober and motivated to make corrections or improve good deeds. Public interest must always govern editorials.

Newspaper editorials according to Michael (2013, p.4) “have served a purpose of informing and persuading the public for generations.” He narrates that the editorial has grown from its beginning forms in 10th century England as newsletters to the public, to now, as fixtures in major daily newspapers across this country, either in print or online formats. Generally, Meltzer (2007, p. 84) says “journalism strives to be objective in reporting and covering the news of the day”. A newspaper’s editorial page exists both as an extension of objectivity and an acknowledgment that including varying views on issues is one specific way to control bias and promote a stronger idea of objectivity. Meltzer (2007) adds that historically, the editorial page is the only place in which pure opinion exists in newspapers. Writing on the power of editorials, Michael (2013, p.4) says:

Since the beginning of formal research in the areas of persuasion, researchers have examined the effect that political communication has had on readers. Editorials are often filled with political

commentary. The grandest goal of editorials is to persuade the audience in some manner... the goal is also to inform or explain and stimulate insight. The growing intricacy of current events requires effective editorial writers to explain more than pontificate.

The job of the editorial board is to meet, deliberate and agree on an issue before publishing such view as the official voice of the newspaper (Meltzer, 2007, p. 85). Therefore, Michael (2013, p.5) says “in essence, the final editorial may not be the voice of a sole individual, but a harnessed opinion of more than one person; a written embodiment of the group’s overall consensus”.

Findings

This study set out to identify and examine the extent to which the Buhari administration was held accountable in the three areas of promise for the entire duration of the administration. The said three are corruption, security and economy. This section presents the results of the study.

RQ1: What are the issues of concern in the editorials of the newspapers selected for the study? It turned out that the two newspapers appeared to focus more on economic (including corruption and security issues non resolution of which could ground the entire Nigerian system. On March 8 2016, *The Punch* Editorial was titled: Saraki’s Indefensible Cars. Bukola Saraki, a two-term former governor of Kwara State, was the senate president and he had ordered for exotic cars not minding the state of the nation’s economy. *The Punch* notes

Nothing can explain away the impunity and insensitivity of the Saraki-led Senate. The economic implications of this action are glaring, including more pressure on the naira with the importation of these needless luxury items. The national currency exchanged at N330 to a dollar on Friday, while the foreign reserves have plunged to \$27.8 billion from a high of \$47 billion in 2007. It is inexplicable that Saraki and his colleagues are not bothered by factory closures, job losses, poor infrastructure and lack of social services.

Unamused, the paper remarks that: "...This confirms the notoriety of Saraki and his colleagues, and their disdain for PUBLIC OPINION (emphasis ours).

Still on the National Assembly, *The Punch* on April 20, 2016, titled its editorial thus: "2016 Budget Gridlock Harmful to the Economy". Apparently meticulously taking stock of the Assembly's illegal conduct, the paper did not hesitate to register boldly that "the budget impasse, triggered by lawmakers' distortions (sic) of the document for their selfish interests is yet another blotch on our Eighth National Assembly." As if the government institutions were competing to say that there was no succor anywhere, *Premium Times* in its reckoning with the affairs of the Central Bank of Nigeria had lost all hope in the Bank since 2017. On October 18 2017 its editorial was titled "The Central Bank and Mismanagement of the Nigerian Economy. The paper concluded in the editorial with an unequivocally definite demand stating that "...We are constrained therefore, to call on the governor of the Central Bank to resign, and for the appropriate law enforcement agencies to seek to apply penalties as provided by the law for this gravitous infringement"

Against the nation's ceaseless struggle with insecurity, *Premium Times* chose to address the issue of the preponderance of arms in its June 21, 2022 editorial. It was titled "President Buhari, Mop Up Arms from Terrorists and Non-State Actors." The paper recounts that:

Since a 2016 United Nations Office on Drug and Crime report indicated that 350 million (70 per cent) of the 500 million illicit small and light weapons (SALW) circulating in West Africa, are in Nigeria. Equally petrifying is the country's abysmally porous land borders. An official tally unfurled by a former Minister of Internal Affairs, Abba Moro, indicated that 1,497 illicit routes exist through which contrabands flow into Nigeria, which, of course, include arms and ammunition. Officials of the Nigerian Customs Service had intercepted 13 containers laden with illegal arms at a Lagos port in 2013, a scenario that strongly suggests that an incredible

quantum of illegal arms routinely enter the country with the connivance of corrupt security personnel.

Though coming a little late, *Premium Times* charges the government to enable the newly established Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons function as actively it needs to, to serve its long pending purpose.

RQ 2: To what extent was the Buhari administration held accountable on security, economy and corruption by each of the selected media?

Table 1: Frequency of editorials on security, economy and corruption

Newspaper	Frequency	Percent
Premium Times	117	52.0
Punch Newspaper	108	48.0
Total	225	100.0

Table 1 shows the extent to which newspapers wrote editorials on security, economy and corruption during the Buhari administration. Results indicate that *Premium Times* newspaper (52%) had slightly had more editorials on security, economy and corruption than Punch newspaper (48%). It also revealed that the two newspapers extensively wrote editorials on the promises made by the Buhari administration, with over two hundred editorials on the three cardinal promises.

Table 2: Year of editorial

Year	Frequency	Percent
2016	18	8.0
2017	27	12.0
2018	36	16.0
2020	54	24.0

Year	Frequency	Percent
2021	45	20.0
2022	45	20.0
Total	225	100.0

Table 2 shows that most of the editorials (64%) on the three major promises made by the Buhari administration were between 2020 and 2022.

Table 2: Promise addressed

Promise	Frequency	Percent
Corruption	108	48.0
Economy	54	24.0
Security	45	20.0
The three issues	18	8.0
Total	225	100.0

Table 3 shows the specific promise or issue addressed in the editorials. Results reveal that newspapers focused more on corruption with nearly half of all the editorials (48%), followed by editorials on the economy (24%) while security had the least attention with 8% coverage.

RQ 3: What were the techniques deployed by newspaper editorials in holding the Buhari administration responsible for its promises?

The second research question examined the techniques deployed in newspaper editorials to hold the Buhari administration responsible.

Table 4: Approach of editorial

Position	Frequency	Percent
Condemnation	171	76.0
Commendation	54	24.0

Position	Frequency	Percent
Total	225	100.0

Table 4 shows the position of editorials on the promises made by the Buhari administration. Results reveal that majority of the editorials on the three major promises were followed condemnation approach (76%) while about quarter of the editorials followed commendation approach (24%).

Table 5: Techniques used

Technique	Frequency	Percent
Investigation	171	76.0
Opinion	54	24.0
Total	225	100.0

Table 5 shows that most of the editorials on the three major promises made by the Buhari administration used investigative technique (76%) while about quarter (24%) were opinion-based.

It was found that most of the editorials (64%) on the three major promises made by the Buhari administration were between 2020 and 2022, being the second term of the Buhari administration. Although there were substantial editorials on the three major promises made in the first tenure (36%), majority of the editorials (64%) were in the second tenure. This shows that the newspapers got quite sensitive during the second term of the administration. They exercised adequate patience before using their editorials to assess the performance of the government in the three major areas. While this is commendable, it should be noted that the media do not have to wait too long before providing fair assessment of an administration's performance. Key indices of development can be used as yardstick for editorial writing each month.

Results further indicate that the two newspapers extensively wrote editorials on the promises made by the Buhari administration, with over

two hundred editorials on the three cardinal promises. If calculated cumulatively, editorials on the three issues constitute about 10% of all editorials written within the eight years of the Buhari government. Given the fact that the media have several issues to equally address, it will be fair to say that the media gave adequate attention to the promises made by the government. *Premium Times* had slightly more editorials (52%) on security, economy and corruption than Punch newspaper (48%). This shows that the two newspapers gave the needed attention to the promises considering that they had almost equal share of editorials. Results revealed that newspapers focused more on corruption with nearly half of all the editorials (48%), followed by editorials on the economy (24%) while security had the least attention with 8% coverage. Several studies (e.g Camaj, 2013; Kayode, 2017; Fatonji, 2021) affirm that corruption is at the centre of several developmental efforts in Nigeria. It affects the economy and the fight against security. Thus, it was not out of place to focus more on issues related to corruption in the Buhari administration. However, the media should have also prioritized other major promises in their editorials.

The study also revealed that majority of the editorials on the three major promises followed constructive criticism and investigative approach (76%) while about quarter of the editorials followed commendation and opinion-based approach (24%). The newspapers were very critical in their editorials as they blatantly condemned ineffective policies and their implementations. Yet, they were very constructive. On another positive note, the newspapers did not just condemn government activities, they also commended the government where necessary. This shows a balanced perspective on governance. Most of the issues in the editorials were also investigated as verifiable data and facts were often used. On the negative side, about quarter of the editorials were mere opinions. Ideally, editorials should be a blend of investigations and opinions, especially public opinion. Theoretically, the findings agree with the postulations development media theory as adequate attention was given to the three major promises

made by the Buhari government. The three issues-corruption, economy and security are core aspects of Nigeria's developmental challenges.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the media gave adequate attention to the Buhari government as newspaper editorials were focused on the three major promises made by the government. The newspapers were very constructive in their criticisms and they followed investigative approach to a large extent. There was however more focus on corruption issues. Thus, it is recommended that the media should endeavor to give fair attention to all major developmental challenges in their editorials.

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