

# Corruption and Newspaper Collapse in Nigeria: Evidence from *The Comet*, *The Democrat* and *New Nigerian Newspapers*

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## Abstract

Corruption has been an endemic problem in Nigeria, accounting for the collapse of many institutions in the country. In the nation's media industry many a promising newspaper was set up with all the potentials for success and viability only for such newspapers to collapse a few years or even months later. This paper sought to find out how corruption contributed (as there are many other factors) to the failure of newspapers in Nigeria with specific focus on *The Comet*, *The Democrat* and the *New Nigerian Newspapers*. It employed qualitative method of data collection and analysis, including documents analysis, In-Depth Interviews and emic ethnography. The research was located within Social Systems Theory. It was found that although the demise of many otherwise promising newspapers, both public and private, was part of the systemic institutional collapse in the country, corruption was partly responsible for the collapse of the three newspapers studied. It was further established that each of the three newspapers had its own specific pattern of corruption that bedeviled it. It was, therefore, recommended among others, that newspaper organizations should ensure prudent management of resources and financial discipline.

**Keywords:** *.Corruption .Newspaper collapse .Social system .Poor management*

## Introduction

Corruption is a major social problem that has wrecked businesses and nations. Corruption has often been described as a bane to development at both micro and macro levels. While those involved in corruption may enjoy short-term benefits, the organization or society suffers dire consequences. According to Bhargava (2005, p.1), corruption can be defined as "the abuse of public or corporate office for private gain". The United Nations (2004) describes corruption as an insidious scourge that impoverishes many countries and affects us all. It is generally seen as a scourge to national or international economic development and growth and an impediment to human and societal progress. It undermines economic progress, weakens democratic institutions and impinges on public trust and confidence, thereby paving way for inequalities. It is a global phenomenon whose prevalence, however, differs from one country to another, depending on the level of political will, institutional maturity and capacity to manage the problem.

Waziri (2007), defines corruption as "The use of public power and resources in a manner that advances individual, factional, ethnic, religious or other limited interests at the expense of more broad based social, national or global needs... Theft, bribery, extortion, patronage, nepotism, and other practices grouped together as corruption." Waziri (2007), maintains that:

In Nigeria, corruption has become a part and parcel of the society, which (corruption) appears to be out of control. The ... chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Mrs. Farida Waziri, recently voiced out her

concerns at the level of corruption in Nigeria by stating that the “endemic corruption cases in the country has overwhelmed the commission’s workforce”. She said with a population of one hundred and forty million, the commission’s one thousand five hundred operatives finds the task of prosecuting corruption cases daunting (Waziri, 2007).

In this paper, the term corruption is used to refer to abuse of official power, deliberate breach of laid down procedures, theft, bribery, extortion, patronage, nepotism, favoritism, in all its facets and other practices that are meant to serve parochial interests at the expense of the more universal or larger interest of group, community or nation. The Nigerian media have been so reflective of the State, its history, peoples, institutions, politics and its society. The history of the Nigerian Press is, by extension, the history of Nigeria (Jakande cited in Oso, et al, 2011). Therefore, the Nigerian press, like other institutions in the country, might have also been engrossed in corruption because, according to McQuail (2007), the press takes on the coloration of the environment under which it operates. This paper argues that the press, being part of the social system, cannot but reflect the general conduct of the system.

The paper investigates the contribution of corruption to the demise of three otherwise promising newspapers, namely, *The Comet*, *The Democrat* and the *New Nigerian* Newspapers. The justification of the paper lies in the fact that genuine democracy, development and by extension, security very much depend on the presence of a robust press which acts as a watchdog in the society. Information is central to better decision making by voters, consumers, and investors. Much of such information is provided by the media, particularly newspapers, television and radio. These media collect information and make it available to the public (Djankov, McLeish, Nenova, and Shleifer, 2001). Kolawole (1998) has also observed that “In the performance of its public watchdog role, the press serves as a behavioural regulatory agent on the activities of government and its functionaries.” It must be stated that while this paper specifically dealt with the different forms of corruption in the studied newspapers that contributed to their death, other factors like weak economy, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), literacy level, poor advertising, low circulation etc. also, one way or the other, affected their death.

## Literature Review

### Forms of Corruption

According to Bhargava (2005, p.2) corruption can be categorized into the following:

- a. **Grand Corruption:** this means economic inequalities perpetrated by Heads of States, Ministers or top government functionaries to serve the interest of the privileged few.
- b. **Political Corruption:** this involves corrupt practices by monarchs, dictators and legislators acting in their role as creators of the rules which a polity operates. Here, monarchs, legislators seek bribes from individuals or organizations for political favoritism at the expense of public interest.
- c. **Corporate Corruption:** this involves corrupt practices in a corporate organization like a media firm where corporate officials use the resources of their organization against what it is meant for.
- d. **Administrative Corruption:** this is an act of corruption where individuals at the helm of affairs accept bribes from certain people or organization in order to lower their taxes and escape state policy or win low level procurement of contract.
- e. **Systematic Corruption:** this is a conventional corrupt practices found among people across all works of life.

Whatever the type or category of corruption, it is clear that corruption is caused by multi-faceted factors. These include, but not limited to, the following:

- i. **Unclear or ambiguous laws and regulations:** Unclear law or institutional principles and regulations can pave way for corruption as public or private officials will have the opportunity to steal hence, there is lack of a clear-cut rules that define or guide their activities.
- ii. **Poor enforcement of property rights and the rule of law:** any society where the rule of law and property rights is poorly defined and enforced, corruption is likely to prevail

especially where the rights of individuals and corporate institutions to own property is not clearly defined. In some places for instance, people own property much more than their entire life time income can finance with the state doing little or nothing about.

- iii. **Historical and cultural background:** the cultural background of an individual or society can also be a trigger for corruption. For example, an ideology of a given group may encourage favoritism to one another, whereas it could be considered corruption to other groups.

Castreana (2003) however, categorizes the causative factors of corruption in two. First, the personal factor. According to him, corruption is likely to flourish when individuals in a political setting are full of greed, avarice and a longing for power. The second category is poverty. Castreana (2003, p.4) argues that "Honesty begins with a full stomach." Poverty is a precursor of vicious cycle of corruption. Corruption is likely to prevail in an environment that is prone to abject poverty.

### **Newspaper Survival in Nigeria and other parts of the World: Review of Empirical Studies**

One of the most enduring features of the Nigerian Press is its political nature (Ahmad, 2015). Another important character of the Nigerian press is its short life span. Thus, throughout its history, the survival rate of the Nigerian press has been generally short. According to Elegalem (1985, p.65), since 1859, the history of the Nigerian press has been one of a rise and rapid fall in the number of newspapers, with some newspapers existing only for a few months, and others a few years. Coker (1967) had, however, cautioned that "The success of the Nigerian Press over the first century can only be recognized in terms of its role as a social service, a political weapon, a literary and historical chronicle of events and a guardian of people's rights and liberty."

Factors contributing to the high rate of failure were largely economic in nature, including poor capital base, low revenue earnings from sales, advertising, job-printing and other sundry sources, low readership, poor advertising revenue and circulation and low cover price. Other factors are poor organization among media institutions, poor infrastructural facilities, government controls in the forms restrictive laws and Ordinances against free journalism practice (Omu, 1978). There was also the issue of wholesale importation of almost every material and equipment for the production of newspapers, including all machinery, newsprint, ink, plates and other spare parts, and now the rise of the electronic media as alternative news sources. The radio in the 1920s, television in the 1959s and the Internet in the 1990s, are believed to have gradually displaced the traditional role of the printed press.

According to Oso (1991, p.43) "the capitalization of the Nigerian press and its subsequent commercialization started with the arrival of *Daily Times* in 1926". This, according to him, has been responsible for the failure of many papers following the dictates of capitalism and its variants; papers needed huge capital, which is scarce, to survive. This has changed the media landscape in terms of ownership, content and orientation. Oso argues further that commercialization was responsible for the failure of newspapers in Nigeria. He points out that the success of *Zik's Pilot* newspaper in 1938 and 1945 to 1946 was due to the improvement in the economic indices of increase in the number of wage earners, increase in the level of education and literacy, urbanization and industrialization.

Haruna (2006) points that the factors of illiteracy, politics, lack of advertisements, lack of interest by the elites in the areas of establishing media houses, poor income distribution, technology (internet) and above all, the weak political economy of the northern region were responsible for the bleakness of media survival in the region. The paper emphasized that were the requisite infrastructure like good roads, electricity, and water in good shape, it would have boosted the economy of the region and thereby reducing the cost of managing media business in the North.

State creation is part of the politics of the military and such new states heralded the "haphazard" establishment of state press, which could not stand the test of the bad economy occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) then. In fact, many state owned newspapers disappeared soon after a few years of publication.

Politics and economic factors have also been found to be the major factors responsible for newspaper collapse in other parts of the world with little variation here and there. For instance, Kirkpatrick (1999) concluded, after going through frontier papers in the United States and New Zealand that the provincial newspapers impacted on politics by playing major roles in the political landscape. Politics also impacted on their survival and sustenance.

In Italy, political loyalty rather than the quest for profit has been found to characterize newspaper operations (Hanretty, 2009). Owners of newspapers, rather than pursue the goals of profit, decided to use their newspapers to champion political goals. Thus, the contents of the media were used to push a line that satisfies the interest of the government. Also in a longitudinal study of the entire newspapers in Spain between 1966 to 1993 to determine whether institutional context (dictatorship or democracy) determines success and failure in newspaper organization it was found that institutional structure affects success as newspaper organization, thrived better in a democracy than in a dictatorship.

It was also found that the survival of independent media in an authoritarian regime is mostly hinged on political affiliation in Trinidad (Cruickshank, 2005). This factor, among others, led to the failure of the *Independent* even though the same factor contributed to its birth and career. That is to say that the *Independent* was established for the purpose of politics. Cruickshank's study is of benefit methodologically (using primarily the qualitative survey method with the interview as the instrument of data collection among other methods and instruments). Again, the study measured the survival of newspaper in relation to politics in a developing economy like Nigeria, though it only studied one failed newspaper without looking at any surviving one.

While it is clear that politics and economic factors are the major cause of newspaper failure as found in the reviewed studies, little is known on the nature of corruption vis- a-vis the failure of newspapers in Nigeria. This is the import of this study.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Social Systems Theory**

The research is located within Social Systems Theory. This is informed by the assumption that corruption, being endemic in the country and largely accounting for the collapse of many local and national institutions, is itself a systemic problem. The perspective of social system is derived from the experience of a biological organism. According to this perspective, for one to understand how an organization functions, one needs to study and examine the parts in relation to one another because no part exists or functions in isolation (Kar, 2012,p.179), as they all work together to maintain the organization. According to Talcott Parsons:

A social system consists of a polarity of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which at least has a physical or environment aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of tendency to the 'optimism of gratification' and whose relation to their situation, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols (cited in Kar, 2012,p.180)

Such interactions among individuals are not carried out in a hazardous manner, but are very much patterned with each playing their roles in terms of the status they occupy in the society.

Kar (2012,p. 180) observes that "A system presupposed a structure that is designated to perform certain functions. If any parts is detached or if the balance exist among the parts is disturbed other parts may not fulfill their functions effectively". Talcott Parsons (cited in Karl 2012,p. 180) says that social systems functions for the purposes of: (i) Adaptation; (ii) Goal attainment; (iii) Integration and (iv) Pattern Maintenance and Tension Management. The theory aims to understand social reality. It searches for a holistic theoretical framework.

The Social Systems Theory is considered here on the assumption that the three newspapers are subsystems within the Nigerian supra-system and, therefore, the effective functioning or otherwise of the latter is bound to reflect on the former (Ahmad, 2015).

### Methodology

The study employed the qualitative method of research. In-Depth Interview and emic ethnography (lived experiences-as one of the researchers was a staff of both the *New Nigerian* newspapers and *The Democrat* at different times as a career journalist). The study used intensive interview otherwise called In-depth interview (IDI) with the aid of an electronic recorder. Six respondents were purposively selected in each of the three cases, comprising three management staff, one veteran journalist and two academics. The need to interview academics as part of the Key Informants arose from the fact that data from newspaper editors on the performance or otherwise of their papers are sometimes different from what researches indicate (OSCE, 2010). The interview schedule was designed to find out whether corruption is a factor in the failure of the newspapers in focus. The data gathered from the IDI were analyzed using the thematic and narrative analysis techniques because of their simplicity, data contextualization and also because they are devoid of the problems associated with quantitative measurement and present day statistical analyses of qualitative data (Pope, Ziebland and Mays, 2000).

### Results

#### Corruption in the Comet Newspaper

According to Femi Kusa (in Jimoh, 2015), *The Comet* was established in July, 1999 following the fall out Femi Kusa and Lade Bonuola had with the management of *The Guardian* newspaper as a result ethnic rivalry between the Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups working with the company. The Igbo colleagues accused the Yorubas of favouring their kinsmen against the Igbos who were more in numbers within the organization at the time. Consequently, Femi Kusa, who was then editor and Lade Bonuola, then Managing Director/Editor-in-Chief, were promoted to consulting directors with no direct management responsibilities. This angered them, and led to their resignation from *The Guardian* newspapers. Subsequently, they went ahead to establish *The Comet*. The first edition of the paper made its debut on Monday, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1999.

Some of the problems *The Comet* faced were that of staff disloyalty and greed. For instance, Kusa narrates how staff of the commercial department of the company on advert canvassing, rather than persistently persuade advertisers to put their advertisements in *The Comet*, gave the option of *The Guardian* because advertisers were reluctant to place adverts in the new newspapers. As Kusa puts it, "those boys and girls...will go and give the adverts to *The Guardian* and collect their commission. They were living fine, we were suffering, and I say why don't we disband them?" He pointed out the weakness of the management who could not take the appropriate decisions to handle the situation due to favoritism. "We carried a huge bill which we could not resolve and these guys were doing fine at the expense of the company" These were the major cases of corruption that largely contributed to the short life span of the paper as the paper could not get the needed revenue from advertisement which is no doubt the mainstay of the media (Azikiwe, 1970; Kirkpatrick, 1996; AMDI, 2006; Haruna, 2006; Malam, 2009; McQuail, 2007; Hanretty, 2009). If the advertisements revenue were not corruptly diverted to private pockets, perhaps the story of *The Comet* would have been different.

#### Corruption in the Democrat

*The Democrat* was established in 1983 by the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN) to serve as its mouthpiece. This followed a rift between late M.K.O. Abiola and the NPN leadership. Abiola was the proprietor of the *Concord* Group of newspapers and was no longer interested in protecting the interest of the party following the unfavorable results of the Kano convention of the NPN. He had contested for the national chairmanship of the party but lost. So, NPN decided to establish *The Democrat*. The paper could not continue because of the Buhari/Idiagbon's coup de tat, which was executed on the night the paper was launched. *The Democrat* newspaper was resuscitated in 1997 by Alhaji Ismaila Isa Funtua (Jimoh, 2015).

Findings from the in-depth interview revealed that the management of *The Democrat* was not prudent with the resources of the organization. There was allegations of poor management of resources as Mohammed Haruna (one of the interviewees for the study) recalled. He said overheard cost was enormous following the payment of heavy salaries and purchase and maintenance of fleets of cars at the time when they were just beginning. Besides, they had fleets

of vans for circulating the paper across the nation even to places where they had no market and could not recoup the cost of transporting the papers there.

It was gathered that the production staff in collusion with circulation staff, security men and vendors were under-cutting sales. The production staff in collaboration with those in circulation, printed their own copies of the paper and sold them to the vendors at reduced price. The vendors in turn sold such copies first before the company's own to the extent that there was much of the paper in circulation and less in financial returns. Such fraud in *The Democrat* might not be unconnected with inadequate welfare packages and lack of prompt payment of salaries. Some staffers of the commercial and account departments were also involved in the under-cutting of sales. Besides, they were not interested in opening new sales outlets which would have helped the paper. As Abdulhameed Babatunde (one of the interviewees) alleged "the printers were in the habit of printing the newspaper every day and selling to vendors under the counter. They were selling at lower prices. We did some investigation and we caught them putting newspaper in their trousers." Babatunde further revealed how some staff connived with the security men at the gate:

I just decided to storm the place unexpectedly just about the time they had just finished printing. I decided that there must be a body search at the gate. We caught them, they confessed, even the distributors could not explain because there was much sales but they always bring back unsold copies. This shows that the vendors were getting direct supply from the staff where the distributors were given official location of newspapers of which they did not give the vendors but the vendors will sell the one they have gotten through the black market because that is their own money. We had a major burglary, some of the staff were also involved, staff bugled store, packed production materials, sell to local printers.

Such undercutting of sales no doubt would have affected the fortunes of the paper.

#### **Corruption in the *New Nigerian* Newspaper**

According to Sharp cited in Ahmad (2015), "the creation of the *New Nigerian* was political. Of that there is no doubt. But, there were other reasons. By 1963, the old Northern Regional Government was aware that it was losing the battle of propaganda in Nigeria and attached great importance to the creation in the north of a modern daily newspaper together with a radio and television station...." Also, Muhammadu (2000) observes that the *New Nigerian* was "born" as a child of political necessity purposely to give a voice to the North, within a contested political space, characterized by divisive tendencies of regionalism, ethnicity and partisan politics of the 1950s and 1960s Nigeria.

Again, Daura (2000) added that, "The then Northern Government was subjected to pressure by the Northern elite not to let the North suffer..." So a government paper - the *Nigerian Citizen* and its successor, the *New Nigerian*, were considered necessary for the following reasons:

i) To put across the view of the government of the Northern elite and mobilize them to achieve its goals; and (ii) To fight the Northern case in all disputes at the center. Equally, the first editorial of the paper indicates the paper's regional orientation when it states:

There are many things we shall strive to achieve - but above all we shall try to be a good newspaper, dispensing news and comments without fear or favour.

As a Northern newspaper, we shall seek to identify ourselves with the North and its people, their interests and aspirations - for that we offer NO APOLOGY (capitals added).

But at the same time we shall champion the vital need for national unity for without unity and the trust and mutual respect that goes with it; this great country will never find its rightful place in the sun (*New Nigerian*, 1 January, 1966).

It is, therefore, clear that the paper was essentially established to promote the sectional interests of the Northern ruling elite (Ahmad, 2015). Like most media organizations in a capitalist or neo-colonial country, the early managers of the newspaper attempted to make profits in addition to the paper's propagandist role.

Findings show that the *New Nigerian* Newspapers Company was afflicted with official corruption, which might be one of the most important factors for the collapse of the company.

Although there has not been any probe panel to investigate any suspected fraud, it seems, however, that the management of the company's resources has not been as prudent and transparent as it ought to be. There are stories of the company's residential houses being occupied by the girl-friends of some important board members. Some of the company's quarters were also reported to have been auctioned to some highly placed persons at give-away prices. All these may not be proved in the absence of documentary evidence.

However, one case is incontrovertible. This was the case of a subsidiary packing company, the NEWPACK, set up by the management in the 1980s. Initially, the New Nigerian Newspapers Limited had 75% shares of the company. By 2005, however, the Report of the Northern Governors Forum Technical Committee reported on the NEWPACK as follows:

This is a Company in which at one stage the New Nigerian Newspapers had 75%. The Committee discovered that New Nigerian holding has been reduced to 5%. From the documents available to the Committee, the development appears fraudulent.

The Committee was informed that a Company, Triumph Nigeria Limited based in Kano which was not an original shareholder, now holds 95% shareholding of the company and the *New Nigerian* holds only 5%. There is no record that the Federal Government or Federal Ministry of Finance Incorporated was involved in the aforesaid recapitalization of Newpack Company or gave consent, approval or blessing to change the shareholding structure.

Another case that seems to border on corruption was what Comrades Amos Mathew and Saidu Bello reported and was corroborated by Dr. Omar Faruk Ibrahim, a onetime Managing Director of the New Nigerian Newspapers. According to Ibrahim, Mathew and Bello (2013) at a time, the *New Nigerian* had a labour force of 370 and was producing only 800 copies per day out of which 500 copies were distributed as complimentary to advertisers, top government officials and the company's board members. The remaining three hundred copies were then distributed among major cities in the North, such as Kano, Yola, Bauchi, Katsina, Sokoto and the Federal Capital, Abuja. Company vehicles would be fueled to transport 10-20 copies to places as far away as Sokoto and Yola just to make an appearance. The officers in charge of circulation and transportation would write claims for fueling only for them to pocket such money while the company drivers were left to source their fuel through illegal loading of passengers on their various routes. As if that was not enough, the drivers were also expected to make "returns" to the bosses on their return.

Ibrahim also told how sometimes drivers and circulation officials connived to change figures of the copies they conveyed to different cities. He also revealed that headquarters staff would collect advertising and copy sales money only for them to pocket same through fictitious claims.

### **Conclusion**

Form the findings of this study amongst three newspapers in Nigeria, it is clear that corruption is a contributory factor in their collapse. Just as corruption has ravaged many private and public organisations including nations, it equally has a hand in the collapse of *The Comet*, *The Democrat* and *New Nigerian* newspapers as the findings indicate. This is a fallout of the corruption the entire system (Nigeria) experiences.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were proffered to help newspaper organisations minimize or eradicate corruption:

1. Newspaper organization should have a strong audit department to, from time to time, audit the financial books of the organization so as forestall fraud.
2. External audit firms should be employed to also audit the finances of the organisations to serve as checks on the internal auditors and financial managers as well.
3. Erring staff should be punished to serve as deterrent to others thereby reducing the interest to get involved in fraud.

4. Newspaper organisations should endeavor to be concerned with their staff welfare by prompt payment of salaries and allowances as this may impact on staff commitment and by and large, gear them to avoid fraud and other corrupt acts.
5. Anti-corruption agencies of the state should also focus its search on those who perpetuate corruption in the private sector as well because, the death or growth of any organization has an overall implication for national development.

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