

Independent Funded Media Organizations (IFMOs) and Citizen Engagement against Corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Despite their many success stories in the social and political emancipation of Nigeria, the legacy newspapers have become less impactful in the pursuit of investigative journalism. This vacuum is now being exploited by independent funded media organisations (IFMOs), leading to a renaissance of the genre of journalism that has capacity to help society. A declining inability of the media to deal with corruption through investigative journalism, leaves the public with no hope for salvaging the national commonwealth from being embezzled, mismanaged or misappropriated either by public or private individuals. This is why the emergence of IFMOs to challenge the age-long hegemony of mainstream media practice, especially in the genre of investigative reporting, is worth investigating. This exploratory study, anchored on the disruptive innovation theory, used descriptive research method to look at Nigerian journalism practice using three purposively selected IFMOs: Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ), Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID) and Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ). The study concludes that after a long time, investigative reporting is gaining more traction in the country but only thanks to the disruptive innovation employed by independent, funded media organisations and recommends this as a pragmatic model for a newspaper industry struggling to survive the various impacts of technology.

Keywords: IFMOs, funded media, investigative journalism, corruption

I. Introduction

Journalism started in Nigeria as part of an evangelical agenda targeted at the Egba speaking people on the south-western part of the country. Henry Townsend, who pioneered the trade with his Iwe Iroyin Yoruba Fun AwonE gab ati Agbegbe Re in 1819 intended to use the newspaper as a platform for educating the locals. However, the paper also served to spread the gospel birthed by the colonialists on the western coast, and ultimately to promote the colonial hegemony represented in the portrayal of events in the then colonial kingdom and introduction to cultural norms of the whites (Oyeleye, 2021). Since Townsend's voyage into the industry, the world of journalism in Nigeria has continued to witness several experiences and taken diverse shapes in terms of focus and attributes.

Categorizing media evolution in the country into distinct eras presents a challenge given the fluidity of the interface between mass media practice and the country's political experiences. It is nevertheless still appropriate to identify certain peculiarities in the nature of journalism witnessed under specific regimes and Nigeria's checkered experimentations with democracy. In this wise, it is possible to posit differentials in journalism practice of the pre-independence era when the focus was on agitation for sovereignty, while after independence the focus became a bitter battle for ethnic hegemony among politician-media owners (Oyeleye, 2021). The subsequent military era meat to tackle the menace produced majorly themes of pro-democracy agitation, with the use of investigative journalism as prod.

This was sustained briefly after the emergence of the current political dispensation in 1999 with a shift to reporting political and financial corruption, but has now declined considerably to the point of concern (Asemah, 2014, Suntai & Shem, 2018, Abba-Aji, Balabanova, Hutchinson, and McKee, 2021). The decline could be traced to the fate of the print media in the face of emerging internet technology which has led to drastic reduction in readership. It could also be traced to the various dimensions of corruption within the media, or perhaps the failure of the print media to exploit new funding opportunities to tackle the challenges posed by new technology as is being done by independent, funded media organisations. This paper is focused on the latter challenge.

Corruption has been a major issue of concern to the Nigerian society. Indeed, allegations about corrupt practices and promises to deal with them were major justifications for the several coups and counter coups witnessed in the country from 1966 to 1998. The fact that the coups kept recurring with the same justification over such a long period is indicative of the failure of successive regimes, both political and military, to deal with the challenge of corruption. In year 2000, the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo introduced the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and later the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) in 2003, to tackle the menace. As at date, Nigeria is still ranked 145, out of 180, in the Global Corruption Index. What role could the media have played in dealing with this issue?

1.1 Definitions

IFMOs

Independent, funded media organisations in this study refers to media practices that are owned by private individuals, are mostly online/digital, run by a Trust or Foundation, and seek funding grants for their news reporting instead of relying on readership and advertisement placements. They can also be categorized as ‘alternative media’, but not in the viewpoint proposed by Cushion, McDowell-Naylor and Thomas (2021, pp635) as ‘sites that consider themselves either in opposition to the mainstream media or as anti-establishment’. Since this study is done as the perception of an audience member, defining IFMOs as alternative media will be based on the perspective of them offered by Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich (2020, pp. 860) as:

...news media (that) position themselves as correctives of the mainstream news media, as expressed in editorial agendas or statements and/or are perceived as such by their audiences or third-parties. This counter-hegemonic alternativeness can emerge on the macro-level of societal function, the meso-level of organisations and/or the micro-level of news content and producers.

1.2 Investigative journalism

Asemah (2014) provides an overview of various considerations of the concept of investigative reporting, including that, it involves unearthing significant information about matters of public importance using non-conventional news gathering methods, involving extraordinary expenditure of time and energy, is about uncovering materials that people want to hide Nwabueze (2010) results into some kind of positive actions or steps being taken (Fang, 2005). Suntai and Shem (2018, pp. 4-5) also identified the elements as follows: It is about digging deep into an issue or topic; the issue or topic has to be of public interest; it is a process, not an event; it is original and proactive; it should produce new information or put together previously available information in a new way to reveal its significance, and it should

be multi-sourced. All of these features are present in the works of IFMOs selected for this study.

1.3 Corruption

In defining corruption, this paper adopts the position of Asemah and Asogwa (2012) which sees it from the systemic problem: A corrupt system is as a system characterized by infrastructural decay, lack of patriotism, subjugation of collective interests, improper implementation of policies and programmes and a disconnect between vision and its realization. The systemic infringement could be perpetuated by individuals in private or public employment and could be for individual, group enrichment, ethnic, political or religious advantage. This has been the focus of most stories published by the selected IFMOs.

1.4 Funding Model

A funding model, otherwise known as business model, refers to the bases upon which a newspaper establishment conducts its business. Such models, according to Ifra (2006, p.5), are created 'by stepping back from the business activity itself to look at its bases and the underlying characteristics that make conducting commerce with the product or service possible'. One major feature of a business model, they noted, is the 'description of the potential benefits for the various business actors and the sources of revenues.' The need to pay attention to business model arises when new products or services are developed or the industry is undergoing significant change, as has been happening in the newspaper industry in the last one decade. IFMOs appear to have been paying attention to the significant changes in the newspaper industry in a way that legacy media have not.

1.5 Problem Statement

The mass media is empowered by Section 22 of the Nigerian Constitution to hold power accountable, yet Nigeria continues to be plagued by the scourge of corruption on all fronts and it remains a significant pull on the lives of citizens. Roughly N721 billion, representing 0.35 percent of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was paid as bribe to officials in public and private employment in 2023, according to UNDOC (2024) report which also indicated that most Nigerians ranked corruption as 4th among the most important problems affecting the country in 2023, after the cost of living, insecurity and unemployment. By the provisions of the constitution, the media is expected to investigate and report corruption in all its ramifications both in the public and private sector. A declining inability of the media to deal with corruption through investigative journalism, leaves the public with no hope for salvaging the national commonwealth from being embezzled, mismanaged or misappropriated either by public or private individuals.

This is why the emergence of independent, funded media/alternative media to challenge the age-long hegemony of mainstream media practice, especially in the genre of investigative reporting, is worth investigating. While the alternative media have manifest limitations (Ehrlén et al, 2023, Apuke and Omar, 2021, Seuri and Ramstedt, 2022; Aondover & Ademosu, 2025), their foray into the realm of investigative journalism, enabled by factors such as a new, alternative, funding model, is redefining media practice of investigative journalism. However, this new phase has not been well documented in scholarly discourse on media practice in Nigeria, hence the focus of this paper to examine how independent, funded journalism and citizen engagement has assisted in dealing with corruption in Nigeria.

1.5 Objective

The specific objective of this paper is to examine the features of IFMOs and the implications on corruption reporting in Nigeria.

1.6 Research Question

What are the features of IFMOs and the implications on corruption reporting in Nigeria?

II. Review of Literature

Two major weaknesses of journalism practice in Nigeria from the earliest time are ownership influence, which has been widely discussed in the literature, and absence of a funding model that guarantees independent voice for the media (Oyeleye, 2019, Ukodie, 2017 para3). Most literature on the challenges of investigative journalism in Nigeria have not focused critical attention on the implications of funding model. They identified causative factors for this decline to include, unwarranted arrests of journalists, threats to their lives and those of their families and sometimes assassination, venality and complicity of editors and colleagues in the gatekeeping process, ownership, financial constraints, ethnicity, the Official Secrets Act and limited access to information (Asemah, 2014). In addition to these, Suntai and Shem (2018) claimed the limitations are due to the risky nature of investigative journalism, dearth of qualified journalists in the genre as well as failure by journalists on the field to collaborate with security personnel. Similar views are shared by Onyenakenya and Salawu (2020) who modeled the causative factors into four: ownership typology, external dynamics, internal dynamics and professional deficits. On their part, Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) classified the challenges as based on political, institutional and structural factors. Both Onyenakenya and Salawu (2020) and Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) hinted at the funding model but with limited exploration of its scale of influence on the performance of investigative journalism in the country. Yet, the funding model is what is apparently making the independent, funded media to beat the legacy media to the tapes when it comes to investigative reporting.

Adeyeye and Christian (2017) explore the role of citizen journalism in self reporting of news in their localities, the nature and style of this model of journalism and effect of their reporting. Five (5) citizen journalist reports on different national issues were purposively selected from weblogs/sites. Inter-discipline frameworks - linguistic theory and democratic participation approach- were adopted for the analysis of the data. From findings, one obvious discovery is that citizen journalists do more than conventional journalists would do; while reporting, their activities straddle accusatorial and advisory roles; also, social media have proven to be platforms wherein government activities carried out in the secret are brought to the open. Therefore, the challenge of governance thus lies in government and its agencies being able to consistently open to not only transparent but also constructive criticisms from citizens and civil society organisations via these virtual platforms.

Uzochukwu and Uche (2014) study focuses on the place of the new media in promoting online civic engagement among the Nigerian youths. Situated within the framework of the democratic-participation and the uses and gratifications theories of the media, the paper acknowledges that the new media possesses the potential to engender online civic engagement among the young people population through offering them a platform for acquiring information necessary for civic participation; for engaging in political discussions/debates in an atmosphere of enhanced freedom of speech; for direct conversations with elected representatives; for pushing for change; and for achieving group mobilisation. The paper, however, argues that before the new media could effectively perform these roles, certain factors must first be addressed and these include the extent of the youth's interest in politics, the conduciveness (or helpfulness) of the political environment and the responsiveness of the government of the day to the civic engagement cause. Once these issues

are properly sorted out, the paper believes, the potentials of the new media as a catalyst for youth online civic engagement would be better realised.

Jegede and Obi (2025) explore public engagement in social media advocacy and citizen journalism practice in Nigeria using the framing theory and a content analysis research method. The trigger for the chapter was the significant number of engagements and reactions to the #JusticeforSylvester bullying case generated on Instagram and Twitter. The findings revealed a clear relationship between the level of engagement and reaction. The chapter recommends that bloggers should engage actively in citizen journalism by raising awareness, enabling society to stay well informed. The study also aligns with Sustainable Developmental Goal 16.2, which aims to combat child abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence against children.

III. Research Methods

This is an exploratory study; hence it used descriptive research method, involving consultations with, and evaluation of, secondary sources such as literatures, media reports, official documents, and the internet and other documents relevant to the focus on how the features and operations of IFMOs in Nigeria. This study used secondary data from existing literature on investigative journalism practice in Nigeria as well as details on the websites of selected independent funded media organisations (IFMO). Three IFMOs, Federation of Independent Journalism (FIJ), Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ) and the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), were purposively selected based on their performance on the public sphere. Details about their operations were reviewed from their respective websites while some of their investigative works in the public domain were also examined in line with the objectives of this study.

3.1 Data Presentation

This presentation is a qualitative interpretation of the secondary data accessed for the study and used to examine the dynamics of IFMOs in the arena of investigative journalism and citizen engagement against corruption in Nigeria. It is an assessment that either replicate or refute contemporary discourse on the study focus.

3.2 Discussion/Analysis

From the analysis of secondary data used for the study, the differentials between IFMOs and legacy print media in Nigeria can be classified as follows:

3.3 IFMOs Ownership and Structure.

There is a wide difference in ownership and structure of IFMOs compared with legacy media institutions. In terms of ownership, while many of the legacy media in Nigeria are tied to either political or ethnic strings, thereby limiting the extent to which they can really perform their functions of holding power to account, IFMOs are not set up to defend political or ethnic agenda, either covertly or otherwise. Instead, the IFMOs are run as not-for profit organisations with their primary interest being to promote journalism and social development. For instance, WSCIJ is described as ‘a not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation with social justice programmes aimed at exposing corruption, regulatory failures and human rights abuses with the tool of investigative journalism.’

Similarly, FIJ is described on its website as ‘an independent, not-for-profit organisation that combats injustice, holds power to account and speaks for the voiceless...(seeking) to uncover the truth by bypassing officialdom and neutralizing propaganda, and making it

accessible to the public in a way that eases and influences their everyday decision making.’ On its part, the CJID aims to ‘build the capacity of the media to become more informed and innovative institutions well positioned as central players in today’s knowledge societies... conduct and facilitate groundbreaking investigations on corruption, human rights abuses, abuse of power and due process among others’ and ‘build sustainable media franchises through technology and business model innovations for a digital age.’

Because they are not-for profit, the staff structure of IFMOs is usually lean, unlike legacy media that have extensive layers of personnel whose engagements add to the financial burden that wipe away fund and make them unbale to focus on their primary duties such as corruption investigation. The implications of ownership and structure in the operations of IFMOs derive from existing literature that established link between these two factors and the independence of media operators. Thus, the level of independence enjoyed in the operations of IFMOs make them more aligned to the imperatives of investigative reporting than the legacy media.

3.4 IFMOs Funding Model

The challenge of a winning business model in the face of an ever-evolving technological innovations is still haunting the newspaper industry which in the last decade has focused on digitisation, creation of digital platforms, digital transformation as well as digital innovations. However, these do not seem to still augur well for the industry. The Ifra Report (2006), while recommending for newspapers to ‘develop parallel business based on business opportunities’ and ‘find ways to exploit network relations and speed up their capability to react to and anticipate change’, lamented the slow pace at which newspaper publishing companies traditionally recognise and exploit new opportunities. This, it claimed, was evident in a survey of media industry leaders which indicated that ‘experimentation’ was considered the least of important factors playing significant role in investment decision making,’ at a time when the dynamism of the media industry requires an entrepreneurial spirit.’ This slow- pace reaction would align with the proposition by Christensen cited in Oyeleye (2019) on his concept of disruptive technologies which posits that there are repeated patterns of failures by legacy businesses attributable to the former’s failure to respond to new, low-end products introduced by small innovating firms. This is usually because the existing market leaders often choose to concentrate on their core markets instead of adopting the new and initially weaker technology, until they reach a point when the new technology takes over the market causing the big firms to fail.

The prevalent funding model for Nigerian legacy media can be situated within the context of ownership and the historical evolution, for instance, of the newspaper. The first set would be state-owned operators who are funded from public budgets. Either in the print or electronic format, these media exist to support the government in power at any point in time. Although they sometimes enjoy advertising patronage, such patronages are however, many times not paid for, or when paid for such payments come in very late, thus negatively impacting on the economy of the organisation. In this model, salaries of journalists and other workers are paid by the government, thus limiting the push for economic returns on investment by management. In the second model, we have politician-owners who set up their media organisations not solely because of financial profit but more for political profit. Media organisations under such arrangements most often enjoy advertising patronage both from government as well as government contractors seeking to please the owner while in political power. In such context, the advertising patronage shrinks if the politician-owner changes party or loses an election, much as a study of a similar context in Hungary also demonstrated (Szeidl and Szucs, 2021).

Traditionally, newspapers are expected to rely on advertising revenue to shore up shortfalls from sales. However, a funding model that depends on advertisers as most Nigerian newspaper have consistently done and one which cannot afford to shun advertisers because it does not have sufficient audience to bolster its courage, would make the media ever dependent on the advertisers who, as large corporate entities may also have corruption issues to deal with. Such entities will ultimately use its advertising spending to pull the lever on the independence of the media. The study by Fischer and Fischer (2020) is a pointer to this.

Private sector corruption is on the increase in Nigeria, rising from six percent in 2019 to 13 percent in 2023 and yet private sector advertising is the life wire of the media in Nigeria and will no doubt contribute significantly to the US\$452.00m advertising revenue statista.com projected for the industry in 2025. Two major arms of this sector, banking and telecommunication, spend the highest on advertising in the country. It is perhaps disconcerting that there are hardly news stories on corruption in these arms of the private sector in the legacy media space, compared with stories about their corporate (responsibility) activities, but the study by Stabler and Fischer (2020, p46) found that ‘when a brand advertises heavily or exclusively in a news medium, this reduces the likelihood of the news medium to cover negative stories about the brand’, supporting the argument about the silencing influence of advertisers on coverage of corruption in the corporate world.

Equally true is that because most of the legacy media were established to serve either ethnic or political interests, or in many instances, both of these, the owners would be less inclined to having a profit-oriented business model as long as their media entities continue to serve their parochial interests. Several studies have established the reality that media practice in Nigeria, especially in the print genre, were mainly meant to serve political rather than business interests (Oyeleye, 2021). Even, historically, the expansion of broadcast journalism in Nigeria, through the establishment of the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV), an arm of the Western Nigerian Broadcasting Service (WNBS), was the product of (ethnic) political agitation. This reality about ownership has implications on the adoption of funding model with impact on investigative journalism.

Thus, advertisers and ownership factors limit the readiness of mainstream media to pursue investigative journalism that could unravel political and corporate corruption in the country. This reality came to the fore in the evolution, and demise, of Next, the defunct newspaper established by Pulitzer award-winning journalist, Dele Olojede, which published between 2009-2011 (Nwaubani, 2024). Covering corruption is expensive, time consuming and risky and for media organisations that can hardly pay salaries and have no insurance for its employees (Asemah, 2014, Suntai and Shem, 2018, Oyeleye, 2019, Oyeleye, 2020, Olagunju, 2021; Aondover et al., 2023), investigative journalism is the least of interesting options on the table.

This is the void that IFMOs have come to fill in the Nigeria media ecosystem. While legacy media seek funding mainly from advertisements, IFMOs seek theirs from grants and donations. And because they are not politically exposed, they are more able to attract fund from non-partisan organisations and institutions from across the globe to run their peculiar projects, including investigative journalism and the training of journalists in investigative reporting. The emergence of media organisations with a different funding model is changing the narrative in Nigeria about the capabilities of the media to undertake investigative journalism with developmental outcomes. They are not only less likely to be exposed to the aforementioned limitations of the legacy media, they are equally buoyed by access to funds that are not tied to political interest. The effect of this is evident in the investigative stories

that have been undertaken by these IFMOs in the country in the last few years, either directly or through journalists sponsored on their bill.

3.5 IFMOs and Investigative Journalism on Corruption

The final part of this article examines some of the works that have been done by IFMOs, either directly or through their sponsorship as evidence of the argument that with a funding model that allows for independence, leverage on technology and focus of SDGs, they have been able to pursue more investigations and succeed with impacts and are growing while the legacy media are in entropy. Since inception in 2014, CJID, which also publishes the Premium Times digital newspaper, has been able to publish over 1000 stories, fact checked more than 650 claims, tracked more than 280 projects and served as observer in more than six elections. The organisation has also sponsored many journalists to undertake investigative reporting on critical issues. For instance, they fund the Next Gen/Campus Reporter project where universities undergraduates are trained and receive tokens to undertake investigate reporting.

This project has produced stories such as <https://campusreporter.africa/staff-residents-complain-as-newly-renovated-oyo-health-centre-rapidly-deteriorates/>, <https://campusreporter.africa/from-disengagement-to-disarray-the-cascade-of-failed-projects-in-ekiti-rural-communities/>, <https://campusreporter.africa/how-a-multimillion-naira-cassava-processing-plant-project-failed-in-plateau/>, etc. The FIJ has a page dedicated to ‘our impact’ where it showcases several of its investigative reports that have received attention of the news subjects, indicating of impact. Among such stories are; <https://fij.ng/article/after-fijs-intervention-double-sterling-banks-investment-platform-fixes-retirees-payout-issue/>, <https://fij.ng/article/after-fijs-story-lagos-police-return-extorted-n750000-to-south-africa-returnee/>, <https://fij.ng/article/report-for-fgs-n2-4bn-projects-no-contractor-showed-up-on-site/>, The FIJ has also been involved in producing series of investigation s published on social media.

3.6 Advocacy engagement with academia

IFMOs are also engaged constantly with the academia, offering trainings and tutorials to serving and prospective journalists. A flagship of the WSCIJ is its Pro-Engage which is designed ‘for engaging students of journalism with professionals, especially from the media industry towards enhancing their skills as the present and future of journalism in Nigeria’ while the CJID has its Next Gen/Campus Reporter project where university undergraduates are trained and receive tokens to undertake investigate reporting. Each of the selected IFMOs also hold regular trainings and conferences on journalism and development with involvement of academics and professionals. These are advocacy engagements that are meant to push the boundaries of investigative journalism.

IV. Conclusion

From all indications, IFMOs qualify as alternative media in the frame proposed by Holt et al (2021), offering themselves as counter-hegemonic alternatives to the legacy media on the macro-level of societal function, the meso-level of organisations as well as the micro-level of news content and producers. With an independent funding model, they are able to focus more on investigative journalism, exposing corruption in public and private places with evident impact on the society. For a newspaper industry struggling to survive the various impacts of technology, this is a way forward, even if it is going to be painful for them.

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