



# Anti-corruption Promises and Print Media: The Case of Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Assertions are held widely that the mass media play an important role in ensuring that an elected government fulfills its campaign promises. This paper examines the reaction of the Nigerian government headed by Goodluck Jonathan to corrupt practices and media's response to that reaction. Newspaper reports of the alleged corrupt purchase of two bullet proof vehicles by a senior government official are used as a test case of the Jonathan's promise to stamp out corruption. Content analysis was adopted to generate data for the study. Results show that government's promise was not fulfilled, as public office holders emphasized the mundane aspect of corruption as a strategy to distract citizens' attention from the real issue of corruption eradication. The citizens' hope that the government would prosecute suspected corrupt officials, as reported by the media, was short-lived.

**Keywords:** Media, reporting, corruption, government, print media, Nigeria

## Introduction

The vital role communication plays in human existence can be summarized in the saying that information is power. To Klapper

(1960), the mass media have exercised so much influence on the modern society that their role cannot be over emphasized. The media are social institutions whose influence

is widely accepted. He further explains that many of the defining moments of our lives come from our experiences with the media and other sources of information.

Moemeka (2000, p.1) defines the mass media as the technological devices of public or mass information. According to him, they provide us with the information materials to talk about different aspects of life; they provide information for mass audiences that are scattered over a nation and when they are properly managed, they can act as channels for exchange of ideas and opinions between and among people, communities and nations.

The media are the contemporary means of circulating information. Daramola (2008, p. 31) explains that they include the print media, the electronic channels such as radio, television; and the new media – the Internet and others. He espouses that the basic functions of the mass media in any nation are dissemination of information, correlating parts of society, educating and entertaining. There is hardly any government or nation that can ignore the mass media, given their importance (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1975; Sobowale, 1983; Moemeka, 2000).

Berelson & Janowitz (1966) argue that from the most primitive to the most civilized, every nation uses the

communication system to harness the benefits of those functions of the media. However, Wilbur Schramm (1960) and Sobowale (1983) use other terms to refer to these functions namely: watcher, forum, and teacher. Schramm explains that all societies have watchers who monitor the environment and report the good and the bad news.

Sunday (2008, p.11) goes back in time when media development took place in Nigeria in three significant phases, namely: the missionary era, the nationalist era and the post-independence era. The first phase, he explains was motivated by the need to get people informed and teach them how to seek information by reading. The second phase, which aroused political consciousness among the citizenry, captures the essence of this paper. Akinfeleye (2008) explains that the mass media monitor the government and make government accountable to the people at all times. This, Gyoh (2008) argues, was a great risk in the military days. Nevertheless, he explains that Nigerian journalists never surrendered, no matter how intimidating the odds.

However, democracy ushered in press freedom and the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Udoakah (2014, p.3) posits that press freedom means freedom of the press to criticize the government and its

officials in their conduct of public affairs and all other persons or organizations whose activities affect public welfare, without intimidation and victimization. On the other hand, Relyea (1977) submits that the Freedom of Information Act provides the basic authority and procedure for retrieving otherwise unreleased documents held by the federal and state bureaucracies.

According to Nimmo & Combs (1992), the mass media are seen as the ultimate instrument of democracy. They are intended to teach, unite and by so doing, improve the actions and decisions of the nation as a whole. Udoakah (2014, p.4) and Sobowale (1983) confirm that the media are mediators between the people and the government in a democracy.

The supermarket metaphoric expression of democracy by Golding (1990, p.84) gives the understanding that each government that comes into power presents various policies to the people, the various political actions and inactions, promises, and the attitude to be found in the civil government that claims to be on the side of the people on all matters, and its stand, especially as it concerns corrupt practices. According to Udoakah (2014) the role of the media then is to mediate between the supermarket and the people to help them make rational choices. Monitoring the

government and its agents and reporting them accurately to the people is the task of the press in a democracy, including other persons or organizations, whose activities affect public welfare (Nigeria Constitution, 1999).

The media owe the society an obligation to report events so that the citizens would have sufficient information to plan their lives and take meaningful decisions. According to Siebert, Peterson & Schramm (1956), the information would help in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence as the basis for decision making.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is puzzling to know that despite all efforts by the Nigerian government to put an end to corruption, it keeps sprouting from different angles and has assumed a “polygonized” nature (Omojola, 2010, p.25) with many sides to it. Corruption is an issue that is never far from the public attention either in the traditional media or the new media. For instance, the Stella Oduah’s alleged ₦255m bulletproof car scandal. The respected Nigerian politician, Obafemi Awolowo, in a lecture delivered in London to Nigerian students in 1961, said that bribery and corruption, in high places, were on the increase as large percentage of monies voted for expenditure on public projects

ended up in private pockets. It is doubtful that the story is different today. Corruption is a worldwide phenomenon and there is hardly any society without one form of corruption or the other. In the words of Agbese (2008, p.188), “corruption is a global sin.” Corrupt practices did not begin today; according to Adeyemi (2013, p.1), its history is as old as the human race and has become a way of life (Ayodele, 2012).

According to Salisu (2000, p.68), corruption “is the misapplication of public resources to private ends”. The menace called corruption is a big problem in Nigeria. Corruption is indeed a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian society (Watts, 2008, p.47). It is a monster that all and sundry blame for the economic woes facing the country. Adamu Ciroma of the *Sunday Sun* (2010) writes:

*“Corruption is obviously one of the causes of our under-development and we must do something about it. You will hear people condemning corruption, but if you put them in places where they can readily receive bribe, they will do it with impunity. So we need to tackle what it is that makes people to be corrupt in Nigeria. Corruption is killing the nation. We all have to accept the responsibility to do the right thing. We must stop*

*paying lip service to the issue of corruption”.*

This is because corruption is seen as one of the major impediments to the economic development of the nation. Even with the presence of anti-corruption agencies like Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (Salisu, 2000), nearly every sphere of human endeavour in Nigeria is affected by corruption and no profession is spared either. A caption in the *Punch* newspaper of Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2010 reads “Corruption Threatens Nigeria’s Existence – JONATHAN.”

What then is the stand, the perception and reaction of the federal government to corrupt practices by individuals and organizations, whose activities affect public welfare? What measures have been put in place to discipline those found guilty and to exonerate those wrongly accused? What was the extent of coverage given to the Oduah’s corruption allegation by the selected newspapers? Did the media give it enough frequency and prominence? Why did the government allegedly not react more quickly to the Oduah saga? How did the media help the government implement its promise to the people to control corruption in the Nigerian system in this

instance? Was the government able to fulfill its promise of zero tolerance for corruption in the case of Stella Oduah? How did the aviation industry react or respond to the crisis? What were the efforts put in place to deal with the situation? We attempt to answer to these questions.

### Literature Review

Gurevitch & Blumer (1977) acknowledge that the mass media and the government are conditioned by mutual power relationship as the media are major arteries for the politicians to reach the electorate. It is with this understanding that the unique role of the media in the implementation of government promises is examined. First, the media have the unique capacity to deliver to the government an audience which in size and composition is unavailable to it by any other means; secondly, as observed by Udoakah (2014) and Ebuetsse (2010) to safeguard citizens against possible abuse by political authority; thirdly, to ensure that the government of the day fulfills its promises to the people as presented before assuming office.

This discussion is anchored on the Agenda-Setting theory which explains that the power that the mass media have through repeated coverage of an event raises the significance of that event in the public's mind (Ojebuyi, 2013, p.5);

and the Social Responsibility theory which stresses the moral and social responsibilities of persons and institutions that operate the media. Such responsibility includes furnishing the public with information on important issues.

### Jonathan's Government and its stand on the issue of Corruption

A number of issues of integrity among the rank and file of the officials of the President Goodluck Jonathan administration have cast a pall on the ability of the regime to fulfill its promises upon coming to power. In the speech delivered by Jonathan on the occasion of the declaration of his candidacy for the PDP presidential primaries on 18<sup>th</sup> of September, 2010, the President had charged the anti-corruption agencies to speed up the war against corruption, and respect no sacred cows in the process. He explained that corruption had long shackled economic and social development in Nigeria. According to *Sahara Reporters*, President Jonathan has made the elimination of corruption a key priority of his administration. Amongst other measures, President Jonathan has:

- granted the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) prosecutorial independence.
- signed the Freedom of Information Act, thereby empowering the press and

Nigerian citizens to scrutinize the actions of public officials and institutions.

- dismissed some officials found to be abusing their offices through corrupt practices (*Premium Times*, February 12, 2014; *The Punch*, October 27, 2013).

The President further declared, “We will fight corruption! Our country is at the threshold of a new era; an era that beckons for a new kind of leadership; a leadership that is uncontaminated by the prejudices of the past; a leadership committed to change; a leadership that reinvents government, to solve everyday problems that confront the average Nigerian.”

### **The case of Stella Oduah**

Stella Oduah-Ogiemwonyi, from Anambra State, a political subdivision in South East of Nigeria was sworn in as a minister and deployed to the Ministry of Aviation on July 4, 2011. She was, however, relieved of her duties as Minister of Aviation on 12 February, 2014, because she was indicted for allegedly compelling an agency under her supervision, the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA) to buy her two exotic bullet-proof cars without following due process (*The Punch*, 31 October, 2013). She was active in the political campaign of President Jonathan where she served as his campaign's Director of

Administration and Finance. A controversy around one of her certificates also emerged as reported by *Premium Times*, February 12, 2014.

### **Research Design**

Content analysis was the research method adopted for this study. With the use of a coding sheet, the study examined the frequency of coverage of the Oduah saga, types of statements, sources of the stories, the prominence it was given, including the content of various official and non-official statements made within the period of study, which would help in analyzing the role of the media in the implementation of government promise to the people with regard to corruption. The sample for this study were four Nigerian daily newspapers purposively selected. These newspapers were *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *ThisDay* and *The Nation* of September 2013 to March 2014. The census method was used to select the stories from the four newspapers for analysis. This gave rise to 322 items on the saga for the period of study.

### **Results**

From the data gathered, *The Punch* newspaper with 40.1% outweighed the other newspapers in its coverage of the saga. Interestingly, *The Guardian* newspaper, with only 12.4% news stories followed the event and reported every other day

rather than on daily basis. While, *ThisDay* newspaper, had a few more stories 19.3% compared to *The Guardian*. *The Nation* newspaper had 28.3% coverage.

The study also revealed that the government was not silent on the saga as assumed but was caught unawares about the leakage of the information and thought that directing the masses' attention to the pursuit of who leaked the story, 4.4%, would make the people forget about the corrupt act. That distraction led to the issue being blown out of proportion by angry citizens, 33.3%, who felt their resources were being mismanaged. This action was contrary to the promise of zero tolerance for corruption that President Goodluck Jonathan made before his assumption of office. The citizens had expected the President to act firmly and expeditiously by sacking Oduah and sustaining the integrity of the presidency.

Another group that probably could have triggered action on the part of the government would have been the anti-corruption agencies but they did not say much, 1.9%. The report from anti-corruption agencies during this saga was that they were not allowed to do their work. Kayode Oladele, an international lawyer and chief of staff in the office of the executive chairman of EFCC, explained that the legal

system of the country was frustrating their activities. He added that undue delay in the judicial process was another challenge that the organization was facing. Hence, they were indirectly being crippled from doing their work (*The Guardian*, 2014, p.18). Pat Utomi, A respected Nigerian economist, supported this claim when he stated in the Sunday edition of *The Guardian* (March 30, 2014, p.18) that the anti-graft agencies were no longer working as they used to.

About 5% of the reports came from the NGOs/CSGs. Reports from the government officials were just 15.1% while those from politicians, especially those of the opposition parties were 5%. The aviation industry with 13.8% was more interested in how to save its image and the delay on the part of the Presidency only made the tension deteriorate. Even the lawyers who spoke, 2.5%, were more concerned about the safety of whoever leaked the information to the public. None of the party showed interest in what was happening or would happen to the perpetrator of the issue on ground. It can therefore, be inferred that the reasons explained above were responsible for the delay in action on the part of the government.

Below are a few headlines showing what the stories for the early part of October, 2013, read: "Oduah's

N255m car scandal: we’re searching for those who leaked story – FG”  
 “N255m car scandal: Falana says Federal Government can’t punish whistleblower”

“Aviation: the audacity of a whistleblower”  
 “President wants culprits exposed”

Table 1: Distribution of the 322 stores among the four newspapers in terms of prominence

<i>Prominence</i>	<b>Newspapers</b>				<b>Total %</b>
	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>This Day</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	
Front page	17.5	47.3	21.0	25.3	32.3%
Inside Page	82.5	49.6	74.2	62.6	62.1%
Back page	0	3.1	4.8	12.1	5.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>28.3%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>n=</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>322</b>

All but *The Punch*, gave the Stella Oduah’s scandal an inside page treatment as can be seen from the tables above. *The Punch*, performed more on its front page, 47.3%, while *The Guardian* newspaper had nothing on its back page and others

had few stories. This could be due to the fact that the newspapers dedicate their back pages more to sports. In all, the tables show how each of these newspapers sets its agenda on what the public should see as important.



Table 2: Distribution of the Stella Oduah’s stories in the newspapers

Newspapers	Percent (%)
The Guardian	12.4
The Punch	40.1
ThisDay	19.3
The Nation	28.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%, n = 322</b>

Table 2 figures show that *The Punch* newspaper led the group with a total 40.1% news stories on the saga. Although *The Guardian* newspaper is at the rear with 12.4%, the four newspapers all had news items on the saga. The interesting

side to this analysis is that in terms of pages, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers had more pages than *The Punch* or *The Nation*, yet they had the least number of stories.

Table 3: Directionality/Slant of the stories by newspapers

Direction	%
Favourable	17.4
Neutral	12.4
Unfavourable	70.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100% n = 322</b>

Results from Table 3 show that more than seven out of ten of the stories were negative reports against the Minister. Less than a quarter

17.4%, was to her benefit while 12.4% were neither favorable nor unfavorable.

Table 4: Distribution of Stella Oduah’s stories over the period of study

<b>Period of Study</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
October 2013	49.4
November 2013	26.1
December 2013	5.6
January 2014	6.5
February 2014	9.9
March 2014	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100% n=322</b>

Although the scandal lasted some six months, almost half of the news stories, 49.4%, were recorded in October (Table 4) and only just above one quarter of the stories, 26.1%, were recorded for November. By December, the level of reportage had drastically dropped to only 5.6%. The trend picked up by barely an additional percent, 6.5% in January 2014, and only 9.9%, by February 2014. By March 2014, the reportage of the saga was already fizzling out. This showed that media had moved on to fresher stories and the newspaper houses were enthusiastic latest developments. The big story as at then was the death of the Ex-South African President and anti-apartheid hero, Nelson Mandela, at 95years old. Global attention was shifted to South Africa and Stella Oduah became the least of anyone’s worry at the time.

Reports had it that this was not the first time the media would abandon a story and move on to a new scoop. In fact, there were several other corrupt cases that were still pending such as the Malabu and \$1.1billion scandals, the massive subsidy fraud of 300 billion naira in the petroleum sector headed by the Minister of Petroleum, Diezani Alison-Madueke; the case of money laundering trial against ex-Delta State Governor, James Ibori, etc. which the media neglected and moved on to new stories. This method of reportage says little when it comes to how helpful the media have been in helping the government in the implementation of its promises. The media sets the agenda and once their attention on a particular thing moves to another, the attention of the masses moves too. The government could see this as an opportunity to dodge from fulfilling its promises to the people.

Table 5: Distribution of story types covered during the saga

<i>Story Types</i>	<i>%</i>
News stories	53.4
News analysis	5.0
Interpretative stories	2.2
Feature articles	2.8
Cartoon/caricatures	2.5
Editorial	3.1
Public service announcement	.3
Letters to the editor	2.5
Comments/opinion	24.5
Interviews	1.2
Photos	1.6
Personality profile	.6
Other	.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>n = 322</b>

Table 5 shows that the media performed their primary roles of informing, teaching/educating, watching out for the good of the people with 53.4%, news stories published on the scandal. The citizens were all also provided with a platform – comments/opinions, 24.5%, to speak and to contribute amongst others.

**Conclusion**

The commendable effort of the mass media in the depth of coverage of the Stella Oduah’s scandal, especially, in the first month (October 2013) cannot be overlooked. However, their inconsistency and ability to follow through a story need to change. As agenda setters – the media have to

know that once they take their attention off a story, the masses follow suit. This can serve as an excuse for the government to drag the corruption cases while waiting for new things to happen and knowing that it is only a matter of time that the media forget about those cases.

**Recommendations**

From the study, it has been discovered that the Nigerian mass media have a huge responsibility as a result of the high expectations from the government and its citizens. The following recommendations can aid their improvement and provision of quality service:

- The media cannot go outside their framework of reporting, commenting, entertaining, monitoring the environments, etc. but they can talk and write about the corrupt practices, cover all the proceedings and make sure that nothing is swept under the carpet. The media should express and voice serious concerns over what corruption has systematically prevented the country from achieving – attaining a level of development consistent with its level of national wealth and resources. Where reporters are threatened, Omojola (2013, p. 88) suggests that they can engage in undercover reporting with its attendant “dissembled declarations” and “intense dramaturgy.”
- Since the importance of the mass media has been established, they should not relent in their dissemination of information about government and its activities. This would help the people make informed decisions.
- The need exists for balance/fair reportage to ensure political tranquility and social harmony in the society.
- They should avoid criticizing the government based on past experiences of unfulfilled anti-corruption promises. This can lead to the masses being pessimistic and hostile to a government and its policies.
- Because of the high level of corrupt practices in Nigeria, journalists must be on guard and bear in mind the fact that they are agents of change. Therefore, in the execution of their duties, they should never forget the professional code of ethics and their conscience. Journalists should also learn to expose unethical practices of fellow journalists and the media owner.
- Owners of media outfits are to pay their staff (journalists) sustainable salaries because with incentives and the right motivation (especially in terms of tools to work with), seeking compromises and disregarding ethical standards are reduced.
- The Nigerian journalists still need a lot of training, especially in the area of writing. As Sobowale (2007, p.103) points, many persons do not know why they should communicate whether verbally or written. Many set out to impress rather than to inform. Journalists should learn basic terminologies in different areas of reportage. For instance, a journalist without basic knowledge of political science may find it difficult to present a good report on political events, if he had not

learnt the basic terms in political reporting and how they are used (Popoola, 2013, p.42).

- Media owners should know that objectivity is a fundamental

principle of reporting. They should allow journalist to do their job without unnecessary interference.

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